THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

15¢

DECEMBER

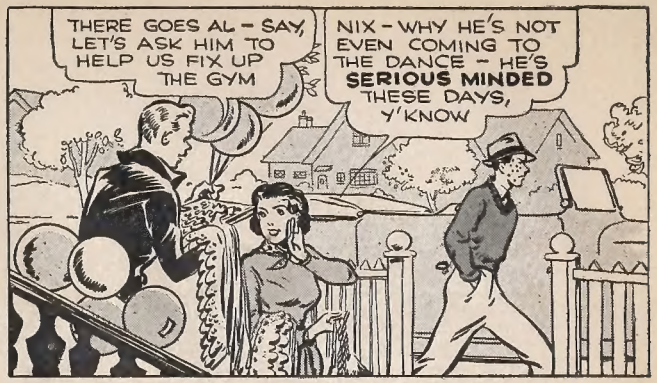
STAR WESTERN

GRIPPING
WALT COBURN
NOVELETTE

BRAGG
SHORT
MAHAFFAY
REPP

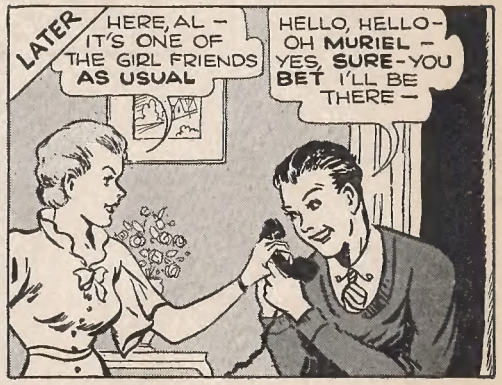
TILL THE LAST MAN DIES!
A POWERFUL NOVEL OF
LINCOLN COUNTY RENEGADE
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

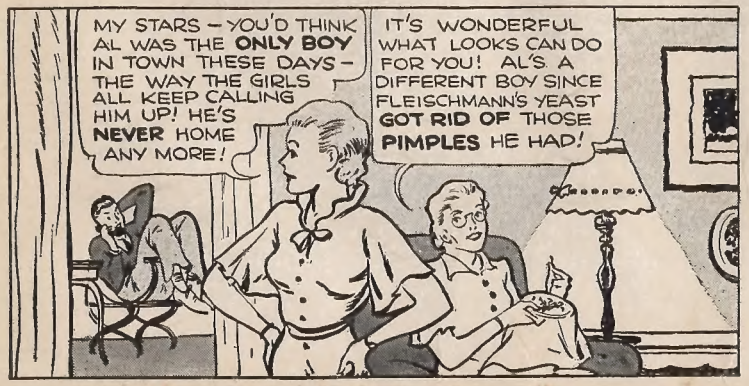
– BUT PIMPLES WERE THE REAL REASON AL SAID "NO" TO PARTIES


THERE GOES AL – SAY, LET'S ASK HIM TO HELP US FIX UP THE GYM
NIX – WHY HE'S NOT EVEN COMING TO THE DANCE – HE'S SERIOUS MINDED THESE DAYS, Y'KNOW

SUPPOSE I OUGHT TO HAVE OFFERED TO HELP 'EM – BUT MURIEL'D JUST START KIDDING ME ABOUT SWEARING OFF PARTIES AGAIN. GOSH – I'D BE GOIN' TONIGHT ALL RIGHT IF ONLY I DIDN'T HAVE THIS PIMPLY OLD FACE

GOSH, SIS, LOOK AT THESE HICKIES – THEY'RE SOMETHING FIERCE I TELL YOU –
I'LL SAY THEY ARE – BUT THAT'S NO WAY TO GET RID OF THEM. AL, YOU OUGHT TO TRY EATING FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST – I'VE HEARD IT'S A SWELL PIMPLE CHASER




MY STARS – YOU'D THINK AL WAS THE ONLY BOY IN TOWN THESE DAYS – THE WAY THE GIRLS ALL KEEP CALLING HIM UP! HE'S NEVER HOME ANY MORE!
IT'S WONDERFUL WHAT LOOKS CAN DO FOR YOU! AL'S A DIFFERENT BOY SINCE FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST GOT RID OF THOSE PIMPLES HE HAD!

DON'T LET ADOLESCENT PIMPLES PUT A CHECK ON YOUR GOOD TIMES

PIMPLY SKIN makes any one feel low spirited. Yet many boys and girls have this trouble after the start of adolescence, from about 13 to 25, or longer. At this time important glands develop. The whole body is disturbed. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin—pimples appear.

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast clears these skin irritants out of the blood. Then, pimples go. Eat 3 cakes daily, one before meals—plain, or in a little water—until your skin is perfectly clear.

—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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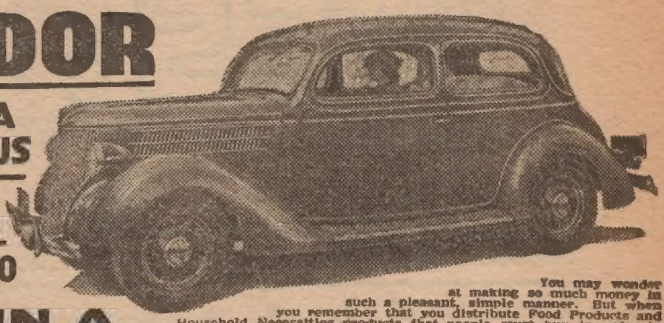
I'll Give You

THIS BEAUTIFUL NEW

FORD TUDOR SEDAN AS A BONUS



BESIDES A WONDERFUL CHANCE TO MAKE UP TO $60.00 IN A WEEK

You may wonder at making so much money in such a pleasant, simple manner. But when you remember that you distribute Food Products and Household Necessities—products that people must buy in order to live—then you see why these exceptional earnings are possible. Clare C. Wellman, N. J., wrote me that he cleared $96.00 in a week. Hans Coordes, Neb., reported making $27.95 in a day and $96.40 in a week. Ruby C. Hannen, W. Va., sent a sworn statement saying she netted $73.00 in one week. I have scores of reports of exceptional earnings like these as positive evidence of the amazing possibilities in this business for you!

If you are out of work or on part time and need cash at once to pay your bills and live on, you are just the person I am looking for. I have a good offer for you right now—a wonderful chance to start right in as a Food Distributor—a business in which many have reported earning as high as $15 in one day.

I Send Everything You Need

Experience or previous training is not necessary. I send you everything you need—Complete Money-Making Outfit and simple plans—on 30-Day Trial without money-risk to you. No waiting—earnings start at once. You handle the money and keep a big share of every dollar you take in. There is nothing difficult about my plans. Over and above the cash profits you make, I will give you a brand new Ford Tudor Sedan as a bonus or extra reward.

Be a Food Distributor

Simply follow instructions I send. You can arrange to spend only four days a week picking up orders from your regular customers. Make your deliveries on Fridays, collect your profits and then have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. Or, you can work in spare time if you prefer. You set your own hours. You keep every cent of the profits from your business. The Ford Tudor Sedan is a bonus which I give over and above your cash earnings. There is no red tape about this plan. If you are honest and reliable I'll risk my own money to demonstrate how you can make a good living, up to $60.00 in a single week.

Send for Complete Facts—FREE

Don't send me any money—just send me your name at once so I can lay the facts before you, then you can decide if the earning possibilities are satisfactory. Don't miss this chance. You can't lose by mailing the coupon or a penny postcard for free details. Do it today—NOW.

ALBERT MILLS, Pres.
8766 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

I'LL SEND YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO START THIS BUSINESS

30 DAY TRIAL

NO MONEY RISK TO YOU

No Charge for complete information about this amazing Outfit and guaranteed Trial Offer. Write at once.

SEND THIS COUPON—NOW!

ALBERT MILLS, Pres.
8766 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Send the free facts without obligation to me. Tell me all about the chance you will give me to make up to $60.00 in a week and get a Ford Tudor Sedan as a bonus besides my cash earnings.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

ALL STORIES NEW

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TEN | DECEMBER, 1936 | NUMBER THREE

★ Star Novel ★

TILL THE LAST MAN DIES! ..... By Harry F. Olmsted 10
Embattled Picarilla ranchers danced to the deadly jig-tune of range-hog guns, knowing that their one chance for life lay in the fighting strength of Billy the Kid—whose very presence would doom forever their last-chance cause!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Star Novelettes ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE MURDER BRONC PAYS OFF ..... By Walt Coburn 52
A bronc-peeler's bones may break and his body become a twisted, pitiful thing, but silent Bill Riggs never forgot to collect from the man-killing ramrod, whose ace-in-the-hole was four-footed dynamite!

TINHORN'S BOOTHILL GAMBLE ..... By Ed Earl Repp 70
The unearned tinhorn brand condemned Bob Wester, gambler, to bitter exile and the hate of the wildest mining town on the rawhide frontier.

HELL COMES TO THE BROKEN HORN ..... By William F. Bragg 90
Brazos Red's greatest peril lay not in the blood-money posse on his trail, but in a hard-pressed girl who needed the help which only the Brazos outlaw could bring!

THE GUN-CHAMPION FROM PURGATORY ..... By Robert E. Mahaffay 116
Only Billy Loury knew that the greatest man and best neighbor on all that wide range-land was secretly plotting its ruin—and Billy Loury was damned as a worthless coward!

BUCKSHOT FREIGHTER ..... By Luke Short 134
To repay his benefactor who gave him a grubstake job as shotgun guard, Brick English placed a hangnoose about his boss' neck . . . . and brought a hell of misery to the range-bred girl he loved!

★ ★ Star Short Stories ★ ★

SATAN'S PARTNERS ..... By Gunnison Steele 42
What chance had a frontier partnership to survive before the glances of a honkatonk queen like Yuma Rose!

WILDLING REBEL ..... By Barry Scobee 106
Pitting his silky strength and cunning against the traps of man, could Smoky hope to defy the king of the wild herd?

★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

THEIR GLORY NEVER FADES ..... The Editors 4
The restless desert winds never smother the dusty pennons of the pioneer caravans

GALLOWS RACE ..... The Maverick 8
Three Card Flynn, exiled tinhorn, sought glory on a vigilante gallows

UP THE TRAIL ..... A Department 145

Cover Painting by Norm Saunders

Story Illustrations by George Wert, Hamilton Greene and Edmund Colgan

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C. C. C. War Veteran and Buddy Rescue Motorist from Death as Car Plunges into Ditch

"Both cars were going plenty fast," says T. J. Trombley of Middletown, N. Y. "When they sideswiped, it sounded like a three-inch field piece going off. One driver righted his careening car and went on; the other swerved back and forth for fifty yards, and dropped eight feet off the edge of the highway into a half-filled drainage ditch.

"My buddy and I ran to the spot where the car disappeared. It was so dark that all we could see was the hole of light my Eveready flashlight cut in the blackness. The driver, knocked out cold, lay there in the water, limp, like a sodden scarecrow. A few minutes and we had him out. But without my flashlight to help us, he certainly would have drowned before we could even have found him.

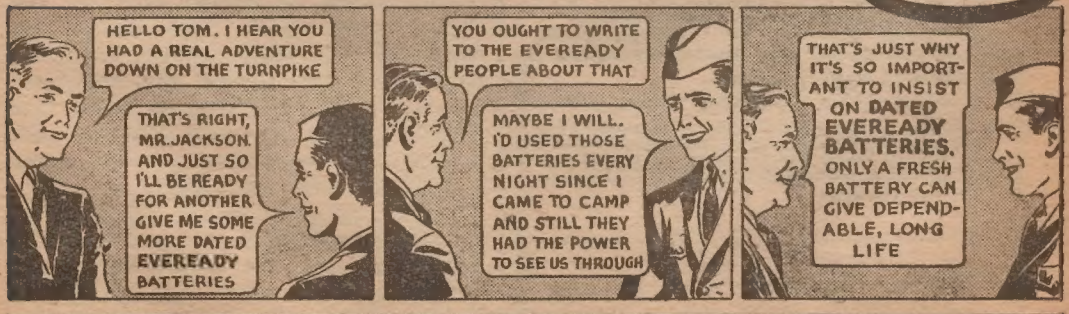
"I've been reading about dated Eveready batteries being fresh when you buy them...and I want to okay that. The Evereadys that saved this man's life were still full of pep after long, hard service."

Thomas J. Trombley

EVEREADY BATTERIES ARE *FRESH* BATTERIES

National Carbon Co., Inc.
30 East 42nd St., N. Y. C., N. Y.

***Once More* the DATE-LINE is a LIFE-LINE**


HELLO TOM. I HEAR YOU HAD A REAL ADVENTURE DOWN ON THE TURNPIKE
THAT'S RIGHT, MR. JACKSON. AND JUST SO I'LL BE READY FOR ANOTHER GIVE ME SOME MORE DATED EVEREADY BATTERIES
YOU OUGHT TO WRITE TO THE EVEREADY PEOPLE ABOUT THAT
MAYBE I WILL. I'D USED THOSE BATTERIES EVERY NIGHT SINCE I CAME TO CAMP AND STILL THEY HAD THE POWER TO SEE US THROUGH
THAT'S JUST WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO INSIST ON DATED EVEREADY BATTERIES. ONLY A FRESH BATTERY CAN GIVE DEPENDABLE, LONG LIFE

Arrest Him, Officer!

I'LL HAVE COMPLETE FACTS ON THE OTHER FELLOW TONIGHT!

Follow This Man!

SECRET Service Operator No. 38 is on the job . . . *follow him* through all the excitement of his chase after the counterfeit gang. See how a crafty operator works. Tell-tale finger prints in the murdered girl's room that help him solve the great mystery! BETTER than fiction because every word is TRUE. No obligation. Just mail me the coupon and get—

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And the best part of it all is this—it may open your eyes to the great opportunity for YOU as a well paid Finger Print Expert. This is a young, *fast-growing* profession. The kind of work you would like. Excitement! Thrills! Travel! *A regular monthly salary.* Reward money. *And remember:* graduates of this school HEAD 47% of *all* Identification Bureaus in the U. S. Quick! Mail the Coupon NOW and I'll send you these Free Confidential Reports!

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1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7389 Chicago, Illinois

Institute of Applied Science
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7389, Chicago, Illinois

Gentlemen:—Without any obligation whatsoever, send me the Reports of Operator No. 38, also your illustrated Free Book on Finger Prints and your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. Literature will NOT be sent to boys under 17 years of age.

Name .....

Address .....

..... *Age* .....

Their Glory Never Fades

A FEW days ago we stopped at the corner drug store and for a minute shop-talked with the man who runs it. He told us some things we never knew about his line of work and then he asked us a question about the magazine business which we've often wondered about ourselves. Here it is:

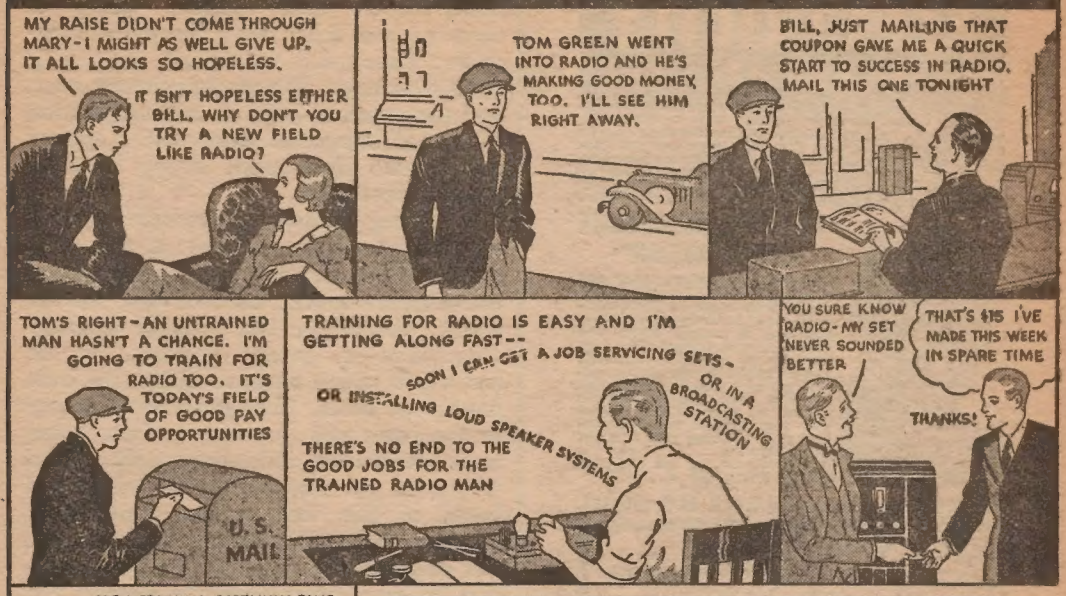
"When you put a story in your magazine," he asked, "do you have in mind any one reader whom you know is going to like that particular story? Do you actually know the people who read your magazine? Or do you have to feel around, working partially by guess as to whether you actually have a definite market, already made, for the yarns you publish?

"What I mean is this: I have here a lot of different things which I know by experience some folks are going to want. They come in here to telephone or just look around, and maybe they'll see something that they never knew they wanted before. That's pretty much for the general trade. On the other hand, I've been in this neighborhood long enough to be a pretty fair judge of just what Jones, down the block, is going to want, and what Mrs. Jones wants, too. Jones smokes a certain kind of pipe and uses a certain kind of tobacco. When he has a cold he likes a certain kind of simple remedy for it. Mrs. Jones likes a certain kind of hair-net, toothbrush, or what-not. And the same goes for the Smiths, Browns and half a dozen other regular customers. They tell me what they want, and I give it to 'em. Or I suggest new things as they come up. Can you do that?"

Our answer, of course, was no. We beat a pretty regular path between the office and our home—hitting the rush-hour both ways. Mostly, the people we see in the bus, street-car or trains are reading papers. We can't very well take a canvass of one of those crowded places to find out who our readers are. Nor, this year, at least, can we fulfill one of our fondest ambitions—to put a few more patches on the old flivver and roam throughout the country, just talking and visiting with everyone we meet, finding out if they like Western stories; why they do and what they like best about them.

(Continued on page 6)

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED-THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!


MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY-I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.
IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?
TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT
TOM'S RIGHT-AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST--
SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS-
OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION
OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS
THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO-MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THAT'S $15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
THANKS!
N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
The man who has directed the home study training of more men for Radio than any other man in America.

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send special equipment which gives you practical experience—shows you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important Radio principles.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a post card—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6NS9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS HELPED HUNDREDS OF MEN MAKE MORE MONEY

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

N.R.I. Training Increases Yearly Salary $1,200

"Since securing my operator's license through N. R. I. Training, I've been regularly employed and am now chief engineer with WJBY. My salary has increased $1,200 in Radio."—JULIUS C. VESSELS, Station WJBY, Gadsden, Alabama.

$10 to $25 a Week in Spare Time

"I am making from $10 to $25 a week in spare time while still holding my regular job as a machinist. I owe my success to N. R. I."—WM. F. RUPP, 130 W. 6th St., Conshohocken, Pa.

$3,500 a Year in Own Business

"After completing the N. R. I. Course I became Radio Editor of the Buffalo Courier. Later I started a Radio service business of my own, and have averaged over $3,500 a year."—T. J. TELAAK, 567 Broadway, New York City.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6NS9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

Train for ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS AT COYNE

The Big Coyne Shops in Chicago have a world-wide reputation for training ambitious fellows for their start in this big-pay field in only 12 weeks. Then you get life-time graduate employment service. By my new plan YOU can take advantage of our wonderful method of learning-by-doing NOW—no need to lose time and money while you strive and save to raise the necessary tuition.

"ARRANGE TO FINANCE YOUR TUITION"

I have a plan where many get training first. Then they have over a year to pay for their training in easy monthly payments starting 5 months from the day they start school. If you will write to me at once I will send you complete details of this sensational new plan, together with the Big Free Illustrated Book telling all about COYNE and how many earn while learning and training you can get there without book study or useless theory.

H. C. Lewis

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. 96-76, Chicago, Illinois

MR. H. C. LEWIS, President
Dept. 96-76, 500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.
Send me all details of your "pay-tuition-after-graduation" plan and your big FREE catalog.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

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Splendid opportunities. Prepare in spare time. Easy plan. No previous experience needed; common school education sufficient. Send for free booklet "Opportunities in Photography", particulars and requirements.
American School of Photography
3601 Michigan Ave., Dept. 1419, Chicago, Ill.

SENSATIONAL SALE--BELOW COST

Brand new and tested imported arms

Model 12 POLICE SPECIAL

Swing out cylinder, hand ejector, front latch, 6 shot, double action. Sturdily constructed; fine steel; rubber stocks. 38 cal. 4½" only. Regular price $9.95. Sale price, any caliber.....$7.45

Model 11-Dictator: with swing-out cylinder and push button; 32-32/20 and 38 cals. in 4" and 5" (Reg. $11.) Special.....$8.45

AUTOMATICS: Model 068; blue steel, accurate, hard hitting; durable; single safety. 25 cal., vest pocket size, wt. 14 oz. 4¼" overall. 7 shot—$5.95; 32 Cal. Auto. 8 shot; 5½" overall; wt. 25 oz. (Reg. $8.45) $6.85. 10 shot Military Model—$7.95.

HOLSTERS: Automatics—75c; Revolver—95c. Shoulder—$1.75; Cartridges: Auto. 25 cal.—65c; 32 cal.—75c per 25. Revolver Ctgs. —32 cal.—$1.00. 32-20—38—$1.50 per 50. ($2.00 Deposit required on C.O.D.'s.) Clip this ad.; enclose M. O. Order Today!

Send 4c for NEW Bargain Catalog: Rifles, S&W, Colts, Binoculars, etc.

LEE SALES CO. (Dept. DG) 35 West 32nd St., N.Y. City

WAKE UP YOUR LIVER BILE—

Without Calomel—And You'll Jump Out of Bed in the Morning Rarin' to Go

The liver should pour out two pounds of liquid bile into your bowels daily. If this bile is not flowing freely, your food doesn't digest. It just decays in the bowels. Gas bloats up your stomach. You get constipated. Your whole system is poisoned and you feel sour, sunk and the world looks punk.

Laxatives are only makeshifts. A mere bowel movement doesn't get at the cause. It takes those good, old Carter's Little Liver Pills to get these two pounds of bile flowing freely and make you feel "up and up." Harmless, gentle, yet amazing in making bile flow freely. Ask for Carter's Little Liver Pills by name. Stubbornly refuse anything else. 25c at all drug stores.

(Continued from page 4)

However, we have received a good many letters from readers. Many of them express their views about this magazine; some good and others suggesting certain changes. We read the letters over, and then tried to build in our imagination a sort of composite picture of a typical reader who likes good, strong Western yarns. Here it is:

A young fellow, somewhere on the sunny side of twenty-eight; a man who stands on his own feet and likes vigorous out-of-doors sports, both to play and to watch. Maybe he has a small business somewhere—a garage perhaps, or he has a job which requires skill with both hands and brain. He's got a little money in the bank and is going to have some more. A likeable, independent fellow who is out to get somewhere in this grand battle of life, he's known some hard knocks and hasn't let them get him down. Yet every once in a while you might catch him looking rather wistfully toward the horizon, wondering just what lies across those farthest hills or—if he lives near the ocean—what is happening beyond the reach of vision where the sea and the sky meet.

Of course he may like glamorous stories of the men who tamed the West. For it strikes us that exactly that type of man, a hundred years or fifty years ago, rode the roaring trails up from the South with thundering herds, seeking northern rangeland. Or before that, he loaded his family and household goods into a covered wagon and, unafraid, gave himself as hostage to a future which was uncertain, freighted with peril and hardship. Yet it was a future holding the golden promise of untold reward, of freedom in a new land which demanded the best that a man could give.

The great longhorn trails have long since been ploughed under. Now where creaking Conastoga caravans wound their way toward the setting sun, a new and faster traffic has arisen. But the restless desert winds will never lay the dust which followed those pioneer wagons, nor the waving wheat and corn fields hide the glory of pioneer graves. For so long as men and women may recapture, in all its color and drama, the blood-stirring frontier saga, we feel that the lives, the sacrifices and the courage of that rough-hewn legion were not in vain.

—THE EDITORS.

TALK-SING-PLAY thru your own radio

BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your radio set—make announcements from any part of house —inject wise cracks, jests and mystery. friends. "World Mike" made expressly for home use, attached to a jiffy. Not a toy. Also put on own phonograms at home, parties, dances, clubs, affairs. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

PRICE 25c POSTPAID

Johnson Smith & Co.
Dept 583 Detroit, Mich.

RADIO MIKE. A handsome black metal mike with long cord. Attached to radio in a minute, and all set for broadcasting thru your radio set. Uniform tones without any distortion. Table model that can be held in hand. Similar to above only constructed of better materials thru out, and guaranteed to work on any set. Only 75 Cents, Postpaid.

CRYSTAL RADIO 25c

This is a radio in itself, as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 25 miles of a station (or up to 100 miles under good conditions). All you need is an aerial & earphones. Completely assembled and wired with supersensitive crystal, stand, base, crystal cup, arm with gain whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. Only 25c each.

AUTO SCARE BOMB

The Auto Bomb is attached to the motor of your car, one wire to the spark plug and the other wire to any part of the motor. The instant your "victim" steps on the starter, there is a shrill whistle, followed by a loud bang. The driver thinks his car has exploded. As attached in a few seconds. Does not harm the car. More protection than an insurance policy—catches the thief in the act. Price 15c each, 3 for 40c, $1.20 per doz. Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.

FAMOUS X-RAY

All Ready For Use!

With the wonderful X-ray you can apparently see bones in your fingers, the lead in a pencil, the interior opening on a pipe stem and many other similar illusions. A mystery that very few can satisfactorily explain. Even the flesh seems transparent. Complete with instructions only 10c Post Paid. 600 Page Catalog 10c.

10c

MAGIC FLUTE

New patented musical instrument. Wonderful invention; neither wind nor reed. You can be a real musician and play all the latest popular songs, ragtimes, old time ballads, sacred hymns, dance music; also beautiful for piano accompaniment. There is no blowing, no fingering, and once you are mastered it you can play all kinds of music with facility and ease. Sure to please. Price 10c, 3 for 25c postpaid.

10c

WHOOPEE CUSHION

Whoopee Cushion is made of rubber, inflated like a balloon and then placed on a chair, couch, seat, etc. When the victim unsuspectingly sits upon the cushion, it gives forth a noise that can be better imagined than described. Price 25c.

LOOK! Wonderful Instrument 9 in 1 OPERA GLASS

35c

Nine separate articles in one. Odd, curious and interesting. Lots of pleasure as well as very useful. Both a telescope for examining the wonders of nature. Opera glass, Stereoscope, Burning Lens, Reading Glass, Telescope, Compass, Pocket Mirror and Microscope for examing eye, ear, nose and throat. Worth its cost, to locate one in your home. Folds flat and fits the pocket. Something great—you need one. Don't miss it. Price Postpaid only 35c

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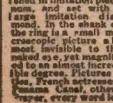

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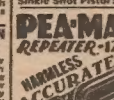

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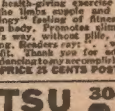

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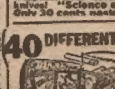

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GALLOWS RACE

THREE CARD FLYNN came to Chino Bar in the dark of the moon, with a monte deck in his hip pocket, the marks of Virginia City hang-noose still about his neck, and in his eyes an unholy dread of the death he had just missed. The next morning he had arranged for the loan of a couple of packing cases from the Miners' Supply Company and opened his monte layout under an alder tree on Nugget Street. He was a thin, sallow-faced little man, and his hands shook so that he had to play a straight game. Which he had not done in Virginia City.

Maybe it was just hunch that the outlaw, Dutch Henry, was playing when he swooped down on Chino Bar, but it was true that in the stage station safe were twelve thousand dollars in dust and nuggets. Or maybe some one had tipped him off. Also, the bandit chose a time when half the camp was at the diggings and the other half was out riding after a suspected murderer.

Three Card Flynn, at that time, was sitting beside his layout on Nugget Street when he saw four horsemen slope in from the north, dismount before the stage station, and enter. A few minutes later he heard the sound of a shot, heard a man's scream of death agony, and saw the four men come out on the run, one with a smoking gun in his hand, another clutching a canvas sack. They got on their horses and started galloping down the dusty street.

Three Card didn't draw a gun, because he never wore one during the daytime. Instead he stayed there; his eyes bugging out as Dutch Henry, with characteristic show of bravado, turned toward him.

"Hy, tinhorn," he yelled. "Two years ago in Virginia City you staked me. Here it is back at yuh, with interest. Adios!"

A handful of double eagles made a rich clinking noise at Three Card's feet, and then the sound of Dutch Henry's galloping horses faded.

Three Card's heart beat high. Who would have pegged that big, reckless-appearing gent to whom, years back, the little gambler had lent fifty dollars, as the worst bandit and killer of the gold camps?

Without another thought, Three Card stopped, picked up the money. The street was still deserted; the blinds above the You Bet Saloon across the street drawn. Three Card Flynn couldn't know that the saloonkeeper's wife was crouched behind those screened windows, her eyes open, her eager ears drinking in every word that the renegade had shouted. . . .

For the next week, during which time an enraged posse took the trail of Dutch Henry and came back swearing at the futility of their errand, Three Card's game languished. Fear still rode him, memory of the Virginia City hangtree haunted his waking hours, tortured his dreams.

He didn't know that a Vigilance committee had been hastily formed, following the murder of the stage agent; that word of Three Card's apparent friendliness with the outlaw, in all its black, damning implications, was rife over the town. And then, one night, a committee of citizens called upon the little tinhorn.

Looking from the window of his room, he saw them coming; saw the rifles and ropes in their hands in the moonlight. He dodged out the back door in his stocking feet as they broke in the front. He ran through the shadows, found a horse already saddled, and pounded away, with the cries and shots of the posse behind him. It never occurred to him that he took the same road which Dutch Henry had taken. . . . His last memory was of clinging desperately to the saddle horn as he felt the sickening impact of a posse slug through his shoulder. . . .

A wizened, wrinkled and bearded face was bending over his cot when he first became conscious again.

"'Bout time you was comin' 'round," the man said in an aged voice. "You been talkin' a blue streak for three days. Lucky fer you, mister, that I was late gettin' back from the diggins an' run acrost yuh, tryin' tuh crawl

through the scrub toward my cabin. That wa'an't the first hang-mob I augered out of searchin' this shack. No, an' I don't reckon you're one of Dutch Henry's gang, either, though I heard they do hole up somewhere around here. Ol' Hardpan'll fix yuh, mister, an' . . ."

Three Card Flynn blinked. Then the realization swept over him that here was the first man, almost since he could remember, who had shown him kindness.

"I'll be ridin'," he said. "All I could do tuh pay you is tuh draw the hornets down on yore head. Sell me a horse mister; I got money."

"Ain't got a horse," Hardpan said. "So it looks like you'll be stayin' here for quite a spell. Unless you want to try walkin' back tuh Chino Bar."

The exiled gambler stayed on. And each day he found it harder to leave, though he realized that leave he must. Sometime, he knew, he would be discovered by the men of Chino Bar. Then it would be a long rope and a short prayer—for himself as well as his new-found benefactor. He had to get away; he couldn't repay old Hardpan's kindness with the hangnoose!

One night the sound of horses was loud in the little clearing before the miner's cabin. Booted feet clumped in the darkness up to the door; rough hands pushed inside. Hardpan had already shoved Three Card into the darkened inner room. Then Three Card heard a familiar voice.

"Yo're time's up, Ol' Man. We know you got a big stake here, an' we come to collect. . . ."

He heard a crash as the old miner was knocked down. The door opened, and three of Dutch Henry's renegades shoved on through. The little gambler's hands went to the gun which Hardpan always kept under his pillow. He shot three times, and the foremost renegade fell. His mates, startled, pulled the man outside.

"Gimme a rifle," croaked Hardpan. "We're in for a stand-off now!"

And they were. Dutch Henry and his crew of a dozen or more tried time and again to rush the cabin, but each time they were driven off. At last Hardpan sank to the floor, blood spurting from a bullet wound in his side. "Make a run for it, partner," he pled. "Save your own hide—"

For an instant, Three Card was about to offer profane refusal. Then he realized that he couldn't save Hardpan's life, and would only lose his own. And a look of new-found manhood came into his eyes.

He nodded and went to the sheltered side of the cabin. He let himself out the window and started running. That race with death was more a nightmare than he had ever known. For he was running straight into Chino Bar—straight into the hangnoose—to bring help to an old miner who had befriended him.

He never told about what happened in that town. Chino Bar was roaring around the games on Nugget Street when he got there. And he must have felt one divine moment when men recognized that no one like Three Card Flynn could be bait for a hangnoose as he argued and fought with them to get their guns and horses.

They roared out, with Three Card in the lead. And in the red dawn-light they took the surprised renegades in the rear, just as they were about to rush the cabin for the last time. More than half of Dutch Henry's men, with their leader among them, lay in their own blood there on that pinion-studded hillside which marked Hardpan's claim. And which he would still live to work.

Sometime, if you happen to run across the little monte man once called Three Card Flynn, maybe he'll show you the piece of hemp, neatly done up, and with it is a thin engraved gold plate which says:

To a Brave Man,
From the Citizens of Chino Bar
"The Joke's On Us, Three Card."
1867

—THE MAVERICK.

TILL THE LAST

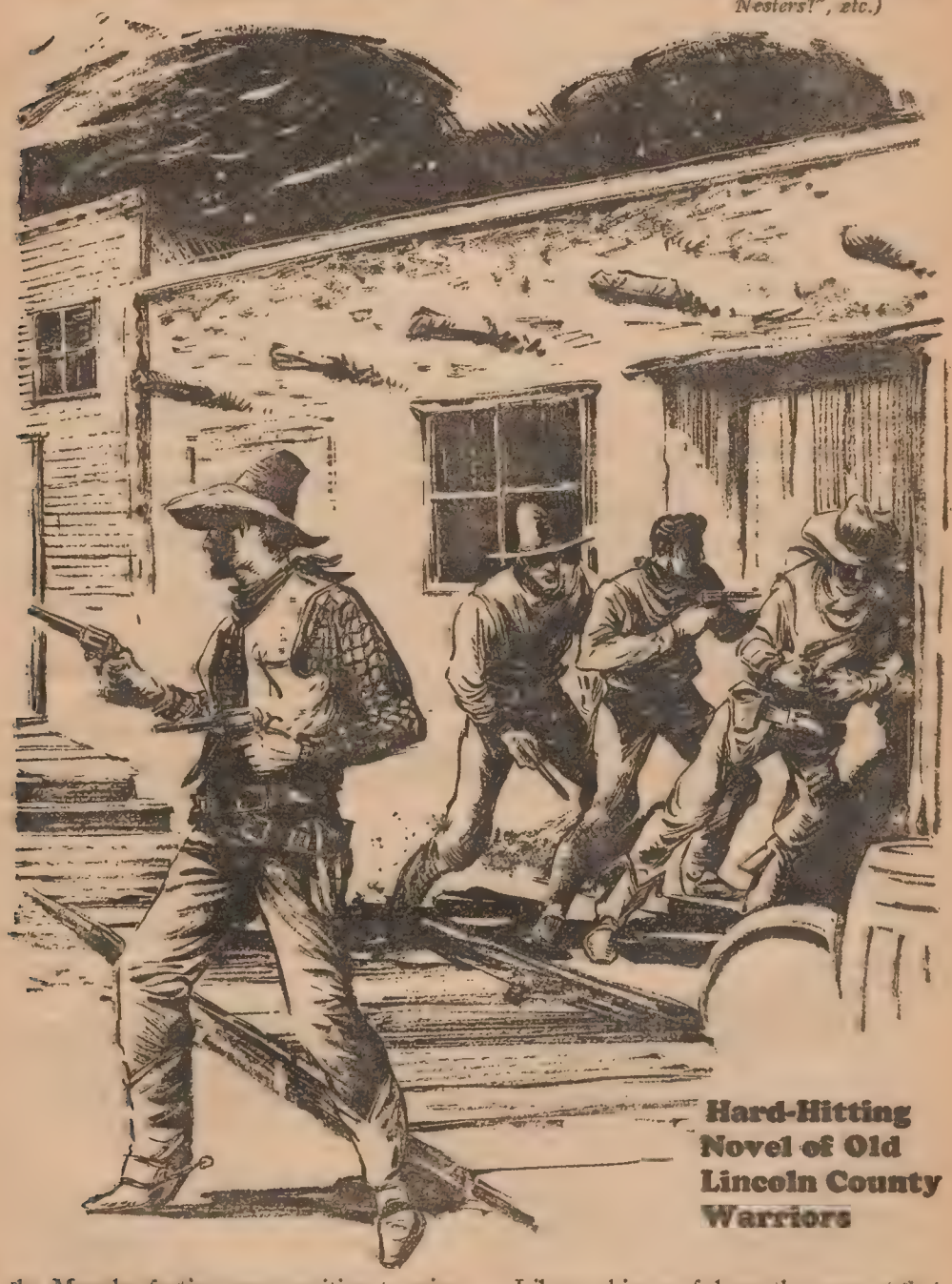
Cursed and feared by some as a buck-toothed little killer, revered by others as a gun-swinging Robin Hood of the wild Pecos country—what man could read the true brand of Billy the Kid, owlhoot prodigy? Yet, one red night, he stood alone, a human deadline, between the ruthless range-hogs of the Jicarilla and a handful of embattled small-spread ranchers—whose only hope lay in the grim gun-medicine of this fighting renegade!

THE red glow of fire pushed back the gloom of night in Lincoln town. Hungry, crackling flames had already consumed ten rooms of the sprawling McSween house. The roar of the fire was the only sound to break the aching hush hovering over the place—the hush of death, startling, concrete and tangible.

Behind barred doors Lincoln citizens waited. And behind McSween's own patio wall, warriors waited. Firelight glinted off ready rifles trained on doors and windows of the last two rooms. Hate-filled eyes peered down the barrels. Men of

MAN DIES!

By Harry F. Olmsted
(Author of "To Hell With Nesters!", etc.)



Hard-Hitting Novel of Old Lincoln County Warriors

the Murphy faction were waiting to wipe out the studious lawyer who had once threatened their domination. They were waiting to write the last red page of history of the Lincoln County War.

Like a whisper of doom the news of that last red showdown ran through the town. "Burn, damn yuh; burn, or make a run for it! Either way, you die!" Now the roof that hid the sky from those belea-

gured fighting men gave off showers of sparks. Inside that fiery furnace it must be hell. And now the door to that hell was swinging wide.

"Here they come!"

Through the yawning smoky portal plunged two figures. Harvey Morris and Francisco Semora, men of two races united in common cause. And a score of blazing rifles drove them to the ground.

Vicente Romero was next, shooting as he came. The crash of lead through his body was audible over the gun echoes. He died.

Then came McSween, tall, straight and cadaverous. He walked proudly with eyes upturned, a prayer upon his lips and his Bible, the only weapon he knew, pressed against his heart. A sheet of muzzle flame swept from the dobe wall. Dust and tatters of cloth burst from his clothes. He fell face forward on his Book, finished forever with a range he never understood and wild, alien men whose violent recklessness he had tried to deny.

"All of yuh," bawled a vengeful voice, "come out!"

They came, plunging one behind the other: Tom O'Falliard, Jim French, Doc Skurlock, Ygenio Salazar and others, straight into that gunsmoke hell, giving back the lead that sought them out. One man twisted, stumbled, caught himself and staggered on. Another went down, six bullets in his broken body. The rest won freedom, taking the wall in vaulting stride and vanishing in the deep gloom of the timbered arroyo.

And now, the last! Slight and boyish, he came out, the guns in his hands blazing red defiance.

"Billy the Kid! Kill him!"

Their triumphant shouts tailed off as they worked pistol trigger and rifle lever. Eagerly they welcomed this youth to that red square of death. Too eagerly. Miraculously he lived through that first leaden sleet.

On the hard run, with death reaching avidly out for him, his own guns gave answer, spurting continuous ribbons of fire. In his tight lips he held a cigarette, rolled moments before with steady fingers and lighted from a burning roof beam that had missed his head by inches. Laughing, Billy the Kid made his bid, spitting in the devil's eye.

His gun magic, already a legend in the Territories, didn't fail him now. He took toll of three enemies in that thirty-foot run, killing one, wounding two more. One moment he was hemmed in a ring of lead and steel; and the next he was gone, unconquered, unharmed. His wild, free heart a little harder than before.

Over the wall the Kid plunged, and into the barranca. A voice called softly: "Here Kid!"

Shadows loomed ahead. A pony snorted. The Kid grasped a rein, flung on his horse and lead out. Five game and desperate fighting men followed him.

Rowels rolled savagely as they roared down the night, sullen and tight-lipped. Each busy with his own bitter thoughts, each wondering by what strange prank of fate he had been spared.

Up the rough White Mountain Trail they pounded, riding hell-for-leather. Across the ridge, they came finally to the toe of the hills, where flat country stretched like an interminable sea to the west. There, in the impenetrable gloom of a creek bosque, the Kid's soft order roused them.

They drew rein, gathered around him. "What now?" a weary voice asked.

"Time to rest," came from the little outlaw. "Our trail's run out to coyote tracks by now. But, we'll thin it still further. We'll split here, an' for the next two months each ride lone wolf. Stay away from Lincoln and Bonita for the same reason. Chill your sign. Now let's build a

fire and have one last smoke together."

The rustle of gear signified their acquiescence. Men scurried about. Dry sticks cracked. A struck match sent a flame curling up through the kindling. The circle of light widened, revealing the tired drawn faces of these six. They were Tom O'Falliard, Jim French, Doc Skurlock, Charlie Bowdre, George Coe, and the youngest of them all—their leader—Billy the Kid!

THE Kid looked them over, his eyes calm in the firelight, his voice soft. For him life was for the moment. The past was dead; the future too hazardous to contemplate. He was a marked man, measuring his existence by moments only. The past was behind him; the future could be measured only in split seconds.

He rolled a smoke, touched the end to a glowing coal. "From here out they'll hunt us like wolves. It's hole up or die. An' death comes so sudden." His voice grew sad. "McSween's dead. Beckwith got him, and I killed Beckwith on the way out. Tunstall is dead, and Sheriff Brady. Mebby tomorrow we'll be dead. *Quien sabe?*"

Smoke jutted from his thin nostrils, writhing upward to soften the gaunt hardness of his face.

Tall Tom O'Falliard shook his head, moodily. "It's a facer, Kid!" he murmured. "But who knows, we may go clear through if we was to pull stakes and ride clean out of this country. Mexico or the Argentine. . . ."

"No!" cut in the Kid, crisply. "This is our country an' here we belong. After two months we'll meet at ol' John Manning's place in Jicarilla Valley. We'll be on top yet, boys! We're right!"

Charlie Bowdre looked up. "Sure!" he chuckled cryptically. "We're right, if we're wrong!"

Billy shrugged. "We're right if we're fast enough on the trigger. Yesterday McSween was right—with his psalms and his Bible. Tonight he's dead."

Silence fell. From some nearby covert, the spine-tickling bawl of a lobo wolf trembled on the still air. Doc Skurlock raised his head restlessly, lowered it again. A shudder shook him.

"What's the matter, Doc?" Billy the Kid smiled scornfully. "After the last three days you shouldn't jump at a lone wolf howl."

"It's our land!" muttered Doc, tonelessly, "an' here we belong. But three by six in the ground is all we'll inherit. Most of us—mebbyso all of us—are gonna die."

The Kid smoked on, unmoved. He said: "All men die sooner or later. Why so glum about that?"

No answer came and he rose and stretched. "Time to break up, boys, an' scatter to the winds. I'm riding to John Manning's alone."

Jim French's chuckle lifted. "Have yore joke, Kid. You mean yo're riding to Claire Manning's. I don't blame yuh. Yo're a lucky cuss."

The Kid grew wistful. "She's the best I know, Jim," he acknowledged. "Sometime, when this is all finished an' done. . . ."

Once more the lobo bawled its challenge, and Doc Skurlock shook his head, sorrowfully.

"It ain't to be, Kid. There's no finish to our job. An' a good woman ain't for you. Yonder lobo tells me that."

"Shut up, Doc," Billy said, coldly. "You've got the creeps. As for me, don't worry. I've gone to hell for a man, I'll go farther for that girl. Yeah, mebbyso even quit this country. Nothing will stand in my way of having her. Nothing—you hear me?"

An icy chill crept into his voice, and no man found answer. Billy clanked to his pony, swung astride. Smilingly, he faced them, his hand upflung.

"Two months from now! *Hasta la vista! Adios!*"

He wheeled and spurred away into the night. Already the most notorious outlaw in the Southwest, only hours removed from one of the bloodiest range battles of history, his mind turned now for comfort to Claire Manning—a lithe and lovely brunette, with something in her character he had never before found.

And as he rode, the picture of that girl haunted him, brought turmoil to his mind and a puzzling weight to his chest. It deviled him, brought throbbing, chaotic thoughts of his past before him. Thought of no other woman could do that. Why Claire? It was beyond his powers of reasoning.

WITH the eastern sky turning pink and pearl and gold, the Kid turned from the road he traveled, swung into a brushy *vega* and so to a mean adobe hut. A cock crowed shrilly. Goats bleated on the hillside as they started the morning feeding. Though there was nobody stirring, the Kid watched the hut for many minutes from the semi-gloom of a scrub oak.

Now, like a vague salute to a new day, blue smoke spiraled upward from the squat chimney. A bent *paisano* emerged, crossing to the wood pile. Without moving, the Kid lifted his voice.

"Pablo!"

The old man froze. The silence held. Slowly the old Mexican's head turned.

"*Quien es?* Who is it?" he called softly.

"The Kid."

Billy Bonney stood forth, and a cry of joy burst from the old man's lips.

"Billiot!" he cried. "*Madre de Dios!* I believed I was hearing your ghost! Word came but yesterday that you were dead. How can this be?"

"I die hard, *viejo!*" smiled the Kid, spurring forward. "But I'm half dead of hunger now. How about some chili and goat meat? I run like a coyote, amigo; my belly's empty."

"Ah, *que pobrecito!*" cried the man. "You poor boy! Goat meat there is and plenty chili. Corral your horse and there will be food!"

Off saddling, the Kid went inside. It was a mean place, ill-lighted, dingy and reeking with odors. But here was friendship and loyalty. In welcoming the Kid here, Pablo Ybarra risked his life, and they both knew it. But he would have died for this stripling killer, and there were many more like him. The Kid kept his account balanced among these simple folks with gold in times of their dire need, and with powder and lead when gold failed to purchase peace. Until now they had come to depend on him, and he upon them. The men worshipped his brave spirit. The women loved his gentle ways.

Pablo warmed food and coffee and while they ate they talked about the grueling fight in Lincoln town, the death of McSween, and the flight.

The old Mexican grew sad and fearful. He crossed himself, mumbling unintelligible prayers for the souls of the dead. Then he said. "*Ai de mi*—alas! There is trouble in the land, nothing but trouble. Where can you go, amigo, that they will not find and shoot you? Where will you find peace?"

Billy the Kid smiled, pushed back his chair, fashioned a cigarette. "Don't worry, *compadre*. Later, tonight, I ride to find peace. This is a broad country and I have many friends. I'll lose myself with the riders of John Manning in Jicarilla Valley. Señor Manning has a daughter; we know each other well. If there is any peace on earth for me I'll find it there. . . ."

"But Billito," warned the Mexican, "the Jicarilla is not safe. Only last week I was told that the big Pajarito cattlemen ride from Bonita to drive Señor Manning and his friends from their ranches. They join to dispossess the little *rancheros* of their high grassy valleys. That will mean war!"

All humor and relaxation fled from the little outlaw. Doc Skurlock's dismal interpretation of the lobo's howl came smashing back at him: "There's no finish to our job—an' a good woman's not for you!"

Billy seized Pablo's arm in a cruel grip. "Who's doing this, Pablo?" he asked, his voice deadly soft. "They can't get away with it. When they hit at the Mannings they hit at me!"

The Mexican pulled away, rubbing his arm. It is so, Billito. Señor Sebastian of the Rafter A S, that diablo Mattern of the Star 44, and the *jerif*, the sheriff—he too is with them. It is *malo!*"

"Bad for them!" muttered the Kid, tightly. "Tonight I'll visit those playful gents. Mebby I can talk them out of it. John Manning is my friend. I'm way in his debt, and I never could do enough for his girl. It's my chance to pay off."

The woodchopper swore. "No, no!" he cried. "You must not do this thing, Billito! You must not go to Bonito. Frio Sarg, the *jerif*, is on the look for you. He will trap you!"

The Kid was laughing again, smiling. "He traps coyotes, *amigo*—not wolves. Keep your ear to the ground. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Death Rides Alone

THE KID had not seen Bonito for some time and he eyed it now with quickening interest. It was different. Not outwardly—it was nothing so tangible as that. The place seemed in the grip of an unwonted tension. Threat of danger and violence hovered over the town like some great black vulture.

Yellow rectangles of light revealed many horses at the racks. There were too many men booted and spurred and gun hung idling about the streets. Some the Kid knew, and knew them for what they were. One, limping along the boardwalk, he had crossed guns with at Old Fort Riley. The man would carry the Kid's bullet and the painful deformity to his grave. The little outlaw grinned, jerked his hat over one eye and rode boldly down the street.

Past the lighted jailhouse he cantered, glancing in at the darkly scowling man bent over the desk. That was Sheriff Frio Sarg, who was growing rich at his job. Anger touched the Kid at recollection of the bloody acts of this vicious official. His gun hand twitched, but he kept on.

Warily alert, he pulled up before Uriah Mattern's Bonito Bar, tied his pony and hitched up his gun. A lean range man reeled through the batwing doors and the Kid braced him.

"Where can a man find Uriah Mattern?"

The rider answered laconically. "Same place. He's playin' poker in his back room." He eyed the business-like slant of the kid's tied gun and added: "He's hirin' gun-hands—if yuh can get to him."

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"Thanks," the Kid said. "He can't do no more than throw me out."

He brushed past, stalking into the barroom. The place swam with smoke and seethed with the bedlam of drunken conviviality. Through the ranks of drinking, gambling men he threaded his way, unrecognized. Passing into a rear hall, he paused before a panel edged with yellow light. . . .

Rough voices struck through the panel, the slap of cards and the rattle of chips. The Kid couldn't tell how many were inside. He didn't try. The important thing was that Mattern was there. Without knock or warning, he twisted the knob, pushed inside, closed the panel and stood backed against it.

His eyes, blue and calm and desolate, roved over the four men at the table. They were dominated by Uriah Mattern, cowman, saloon-owner and dreamer of empire. A man whose hard black eyes, sneering lips and predatory nose stamped him with the brand of impatience and arbitrary authority.

Across from him sat a man in Army blue. Tall, gaunt, dark, with the insignia of a captain glittering on his shoulders. Between them, on either side, were two gunmen, plainly Mattern's bodyguards.

All heads swung toward the invader. Voices cut off. Mattern's full lips furled in a snarl. "What the hell you mean by bustin' in here? What you want?"

Billy tilted back his hat with his left hand. He said calmly: "Hello Mattern! Long time since we last met."

"Billy!" gasped the saloon man. "Billy the Kid! Well I'm damned! Glad tuh see yuh. What's on yore mind?"

The Kid mirrored none of the man's forced pleasantry. "Heard you're hirin', Mattern."

"Sure," Mattern beamed. "Don't tell me you're lookin' for a job!"

"How much?" cut in the Kid.

"Hundred an' found!"

"For what?" murmured Billy, softly.

"Cleanin' up the range! Helpin' rid the county uh shunks, coyotes an' rustlers!"

"Noble aim!" sneered the little outlaw, icily. "I'll take a hundred uh that—now."

"Great!" cried Mattern, and counted five double eagles from his stack. Mattern was feigning genuine satisfaction, but he failed to hide from the little outlaw the blood-money greed that burned in his eyes. He was betting a paltry hundred he'd collect the bounty money on Billy the Kid. Mattern went on: "Tomorrow, you an' some uh the boys can ride to Jicarilla."

The Kid pocketed the golden coins. "Might be dead tomorrow," he said, cryptically. "So let's get started now. Orderin' me to ride to Jicarilla makes it easier, Mattern. You claim to be a gunman. Well, you've got sixty seconds tuh prove it."

Strained tension gripped the room. Mattern's eyes swiveled about the table and he moistened lips suddenly gone dry. "Meanin' what, Kid? What yuh talkin' about?"

"You," murmured the Kid. "You paid me to help clean up this range. All right. I'm earnin' that money. Those Jicarilla ranchers are my friends. An' about thirty seconds uh that minute is gone."

The army captain blanched, but no words came from his twitching lips. Chairs upended as Mattern's gun-hirelings backed to the wall.

Mattern came up, his eyes flicking to the army man and to his two hirelings. And Billy the Kid was laughing—a chuckle entirely devoid of mirth.

"They can't save you, Mattern. Nobody can save you. The only chance you got is your gunswift. Which is more chance than you're figgerin' tuh give them Jicarilla gents. Let's see it!"

Something like a hissed "Take it" flung from the furled lips of a Mattern gundog. His hands moved, but the Kid didn't

seem to be watching him. Yet, before that bodyguard's weapon cleared leather, the man was dead on his feet, with Billy the Kid's bullet in his heart.

Mattern made his play as the Kid's gun belched fire. Matttern was a tinhorn gambler, forever looking for a sure thing. He thought he saw one now, but he reckoned without that amazing flash from the Llano Estacado. Even as his hand swept downward, Billy's gunhand swung. Emotionlessly, he drove two slugs through Mattern's head.

Released from his awe by the smash of gunplay, the remaining bodyguard drew hysterically, unable to comprehend the Kid's crisp: "It's suicide, feller!" Billy fired again, his bullet splitting the middle button on the gunman's vest.

Three seconds had gone, three men were dead. And the Kid's chill calm was unchanged.

The army captain had heard the rustle of death's black wings. His eyes were shocked, pleading.

A sneer grew on Billy's face. "How about it, Captain? Care tuh play out their hand?"

"God, no!" the officer croaked. "I pass!"

The Kid stepped toward him, paying no heed to the growing clamor in the barroom.

"True to your stripe," he ground out, "only worse than the rest. A disgrace to the uniform you wear. You an' your brave boys came to Lincoln town to twiddle your thumbs while Mrs. McSween—as fine a woman as ever lived—begged for protection for her home and husband from the fury uh human wolves. An' you—you sit here an' listen to a proposition to destroy fine honest men, and yet you do nothing!"

Calm, his job done, the Kid turned and let himself into the dark hall, blocked now at the barroom end by staring patrons. Deliberately he strode toward them and when lamplight slanted across his face they gave back, and a dread whisper lifted.

"Billy the Kid!"

His gun still palmed, the Kid walked unhurriedly to the front door. No one moved. They hated him, they hungered for the golden reward his death would bring. But so great was their awe and fear of his wild spirit, they made no move against him. Unmolested, unchallenged, he passed into the night.

But once outside, his actions changed He knew men and he knew men's reactions to humiliation. With a roar, the saloon crowd's courage surged back. The clamor spurred the Kid. He cleared the hitchbar, swung astride and jabbed home the spurs. With a bucking lunge, his pony lit running, the Kid hanging low over the withers. Like a flame his name ran down the street.

"The Kid!"

"Get the murderin' son!"

Lead, like driving sleet, hummed after him. Fifty guns woke ugly echoes. But the Kid held his fire, searching the yellow lanes of lamplight for Frio Sarg, Sheriff of Pajarito. But Sarg was behind him, bellowing a plea for horses and men to run a killer to earth.

The Kid cleared the town boundary, riding erect and giving his mount free rein. Mattern was dead. But Arch Sebastian and Frio Sarg still lived to carry a war of greed to his friends in the mountain valleys. There would be other red nights . . .

AT top speed the Kid hurled his pony along the Jicarilla Pass road. The way tipped upward, steep and rocky. By dawn he was threading the narrow, boulder-littered slot that gave into the mountain valley of the Jicarilla. He rode less covertly now.

These hill men were his friends. If they were aroused by this threat of war, they

might be guarding the passes. That would make the road dangerous enough, but to skirt the pass by way of the upper benches would be suicide.

Reasoning thus, the Kid was not surprised when a shadow stirred at the side of the road and the click of a cocking gun hammer echoed over a strident challenge: "Rein down, cowboy, an' le's talk some!"

Light glinted off the barrel of a rifle, and the Kid slowed his pace. He came to a stop almost against the muzzle. Behind the weapon stood a lean, scornfully smiling youngster whose slack, loose-coupled carriage proclaimed perfect adjustment of his faculties. He looked the Kid over speculatively.

"H'are yuh?" he greeted. "You ride in bold. Should I know you?"

By look and manner, word and dress, this road guard was patently a cowboy. Yet there was about him something which set him apart from the common run of riders. That didn't interest the Kid. By his grim code, a man stood apart only when he was fast of trigger and accurate of aim. But he was interested in the youngster's reckless fighting aura.

The Kid smiled. "Few know me, fella. Those that should are dead."

"I don't recall your face," murmured the guard, studiously.

"Let's forget that," clipped the outlaw, coldly. "It was forced on me. I make no claims for it."

"Don't get snuffy!" drawled the guard. "Or I'll change that face some. What's your business?"

A chill smile brushed the Kid's features. "I'm riding to John Manning's place. Any objections?"

"Mebby. Why Manning's place?"

The Kid shrugged. "That's my business—an' Manning's. Who are you to ask? An' what side of the fence are you on?"

"I'm Ron Howlett," answered the guard, with forced patience. "I ride for Manning. I shoot for him too, if it comes to that. Listen . . . !"

"Somebody comin'!" murmured the Kid. He was calm, yet wary. His backtrail was hot. If this was Sheriff Sarg—He stirred restlessly.

The gun guard caught the motion. "Careful, feller. You're too close a target to miss!"

Up from the mists of night still shrouding the Pajarito, a lone rider loped into the pass. At sight of the Kid under the guard's drop he slackened pace, approached slowly. He was a grizzled man of fifty, seamed and weathered, with direct eyes and drooping mustaches that made his face morose. Now he straightened, stared, then gave a whoop.

"Sufferin' cripes! I'm a sidewinder's sister if it ain't the Kid! Whatever from hell made you do what yuh done last night in Bonito?"

"Howdy, Bobcat," grinned the little outlaw, and crossed palms with Manning's old foreman, Bobcat Hays. "Just in time to give me a lift, amigo. This tough gent seems plumb set against me ridin' tuh see John."

"He came crowdin' up the trail like he owned it," protested the guard. "An'—"

Bobcat chuckled. "Who's got a better right, Ron? He's the best friend the Jicarilla's got. Billy the Kid!"

"Billy the Kid," Ron Howlett scowled. "A killer an' outlaw! Howcome he's the best friend we've got?"

"Forget it," rapped Bobcat. "Time you are here as long as me, you'll know a lot less. Come on, Kid! Yo're comin' will rub at least one worry off'n John's mind."

He broke his pony into a lope, Billy the Kid following. Glancing behind, he saw Ron Howlett's jaw set, his eyes clouded with trouble. Doubt touched the little outlaw. Here was a kindred spirit, a man utterly unafraid of any man or of any rep-

utation. The Kid asked Bobcat a question with his eyes.

"Him?" grunted the oldster. "Humph! He's a good kid, an' a fightin' fool. He keeps a smokin' temper tied hard and fast an' there's not one ounce uh booger in his carcass. Came to the Rail M three months ago, saw something he liked and stayed. He has his points, that boy."

A sharp query welled to the Kid's lips, but he checked it. No telling what Bobcat had meant, but the Kid wondered what the new hand liked so well at the Manning ranch. He'd see. Claire Manning came to his mind and with the thought he felt a touch of jealousy. He struggled to put Howlett from that picture, tried to make him an incident that was past and of no further worth in the scheme of things. But a gnawing discomfort ate at his heart, denying him that forgetfulness.

THEY reached the ranch and when the Kid had unsaddled and washed at the bench, Bobcat came from the house with John Manning. The Rail M boss was large, square built, with the free easy action of a fighting man. His greeting was genuinely friendly.

"Howdy, Kid. Glad tuh see you again. What's this Bobcat tells me about Mattern an' his gundogs?"

The outlaw smiled coldly as he shook hands. "Last night Mattern hired me to help clean out the Jicarilla. Hundred a month." He jingled the coins in his pocket.

"I signed on an' started in—with him! Two others called for cards."

For a long moment John Manning studied, scowling. Then: "Someone had to do it, Kid. We're in your debt. I know Mattern an' Sebastian have been hirin' gun crews, an' I know why. Frio Sarg's in with 'em. We're ready with such strength as we can muster. I can't pay much, Kid, but I'd like to have you stick around."

Quick footsteps drew their attention. The outlaw looked past Manning and into the eyes of a laughing girl who came toward them.

The Kid chuckled. "Try an' get shut of me, John. I'll stick around—an' work out Mattern's gun pay. When that's gone, I'll stay for friendship's sake."

John Manning's jaw set grimly. He glanced from the Kid to his daughter, seeming to draw himself in. He muttered: "All right, Billy! And I hope no trouble comes to you from your stay. Here's Claire."

The Kid had no eyes for anyone else. Her gaze was smilingly direct and in him was the chaos this slim, lithe girl always inspired. But when she spoke, he was quick to sense a certain lack of warmth in her greeting. A chill tremor shot through him.

"Hello, Billy," she said, cordially enough. "It's been a long time since your last visit. Where're you heading now?"

"Why, nowhere," he said, quickly. "I'm here to stay. I been gone too long, Claire, looks like. You an' me—we've got a lot of talk to catch up on. You recall we didn't finish our last pow-wow."

Claire blushed. "You've got a long memory, Billy," she murmured. "I can't seem to remember."

The Kid grinned. "I'll remind you, Claire—in good time. Three words will bring it all back."

"That's a bet," she laughed. "Now I must leave. I've a ride to make."

Ridin' ain't safe for a girl, now," frowned Billy. "I'll ride with you."

Again that red wave dyed Claire's neck and face. "Don't worry. I'm only riding far as the Pass. Ron Howlett, one of dad's men, will ride back with me soon as the Eagle Tail outfit sends over a man to spell him. It'll be safe enough. I do it all the time."

She darted to her waiting pony, swung

up, roared out of the yard with a high lift of her hand. The Kid stared after her, deep fire burning in his pale eyes.

John Manning stroked his square jaw. He said: "I was just thinkin', Kid. Frio Sarg's been droppin' in on us right frequent lately. Mebby this ain't the safest place on earth for you to be."

"I'll chance that," snapped the outlaw, grimly. "I'll take care of myself. Frio Sarg, Ron Howlett—or anyone else! You hear me? But right now I'm hungry!"

"Coffee hot an' meat in the pot, Kid," invited Manning. "Help yoreself. I was only warnin' yuh." Whereupon he turned on his heel and strode stiffly away.

Billy stood there, staring after him, and a look of fear sprung into his chill eyes. It was not fear of death, enemies or physical violence, but a greater fear he could not plumb. How could he know, this child of a dark star, that from now on even his friendships must be tainted with the blood he had spilled?

CHAPTER THREE

Enmity

THE Jicarilla Valley was aroused. The Kid's slaying of Uriah Mattern brought trouble into the open. It now appeared that the hiring of gunmen had been left to the Bonito man, Arch Sebastian, who was the nominal head of the Basin cowmen. And now he organized his forces to carry what he called "a crusade against rustlers" into the mountain valleys. By doing so, he would be adding handsomely to his cattle dominion before Territory authorities could launch an investigation and interfere.

Spies for the Jicarilla ranchers roared in at night with word of new developments. Mounted couriers kept the various scattered outfits advised. And John Manning threw his whole energy into organizing a defense. The mountain ranchers looked upon him as their leader. As such he gave full time, sacrificing his private interests to the welfare of his mountain neighbors.

The hill men, dropping into the Rail M at frequent intervals, accepted the Kid as a matter of course. They found comfort in the alliance with the great little gunman in this time of stress, and they showed a grateful enthusiasm that he had downed one of their worst enemies. But young Ron Howlett was not one of these.

Differing from the rest, he took the stand that in harboring an outlaw, they became outlaws themselves. No good, he claimed, could come from the use of his gun, in that it arrayed the power of the law behind Sebastian and his lawless cohorts from Bonito. Billy the Kid, he said, was the worst enemy they had.

Except for the Kid himself, Howlett's argument fell on deaf ears. Of nights the little outlaw sat before the bunkhouse, brooding, bitter, walled off from the peace he had expected here. Claire, while not avoiding him, spent much of her time with Ron Howlett. She gave the Kid no chance to bring up the memories of past moments and to recall past words spoken with all the fervency of youth.

It lit a slow anger in the Kid. An unwonted rage ate at his vitals like a consuming flame. Nothing before had affected him so—not even the murder of his friend Tunstall by Brady and his men. He tried to fight down this roweling ire, but repression was not one of his habits.

On this night the Kid sat watching the wink of Ron's cigarette glowing from the house porch as the cowboy sat there with Claire. Their laughter, dampened by impending events, was nevertheless spontaneous and affectionate. It stabbed the lonely Kid to the heart, sharpened the edge of his temper. At last he ground the coal of his cigarette under his heel and stood up with a deadly sort of finality.

"I came here to find peace an' he bars my way," he reflected bitterly. "When others have done that I've brushed 'em aside. He's no different than the rest. An' he's askin' for it!"

With practiced motion he settled his gunbelt on his hips, loosened the weapon in his greased holster. Slowly he moved toward the porch.

A shadow, moving with quick strides, planted itself squarely before him. Bobcat Hays loomed there, wide planted, a frail bulwark against a killer's wrath. He said: "Where you goin', Kid?"

Billy Bonney snapped: "Mind your own business, Bobcat! Get outa my way! This Howlett has talked too much."

But Bobcat didn't stir. He said, sternly: "Who are you, Kid—God? Are you crazy? You've killed men for one reason or another until you think yore gun will win you anything. Yo're wrong! There's one thing it'll never gain yuh. She's fine an' good an' clean, Kid, an' she's not for you. The blood on your hands will never soil Claire Manning, son. Choose somebody else. There's plenty women that'll welcome yuh with open arms."

The Kid's body tipped forward, his face a hard mask in the starlight. His voice came thickly: "I want no other woman. I can't find the peace I want with them. Back up!"

"Then you'll never know peace, Kid. Sit down—or walk over me!"

FOR long seconds two elemental minds dueled. One swayed by years of experience in contact with hard rough men; the other ruled by unbridled confidence and the arrogance of youth. Flawless courage rode them both. Both were men—strong men—admitting to all the weaknesses and passions man is heir to. For an instant, death hovered over them. Then

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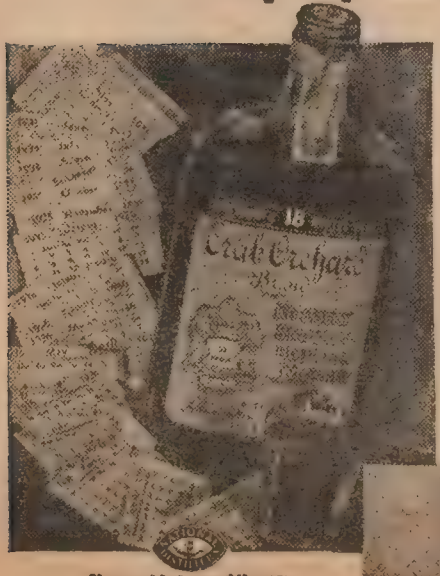

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wisdom came to youth. Billy the Kid relaxed, sighed.

His voice was plaintive. "Blood on my hands! God, Bobcat! What—what chance have I?"

The oldster sighed. He whispered: "Sit down, Kid! We'll smoke an' think. Even at my age, life is sweet. I've felt hell's fires before, but never that hot. Whe-e-e-ew!"

The Kid didn't answer. Wearily, he dropped to the bunkhouse bench, finding no solace in tobacco as he fought off the first ghosts that had showed on his backtrail to devil him. Torn with self-pity, he kept his eyes on the porch.

Now the porch creaked to a heavy tread, a chair groaned as John Manning seated himself. Unintelligible murmurings rose, broken by Manning's half curse.

"Cripes, Ron, bridle yore tongue. Mebby yo're right, mebby not. I'm past figgerin'! But my hands are tied. Go to the bunkhouse an' give me some peace!"

The outburst brought a fierce pleasure to the Kid. He sucked deeply on his cigarette, smiled his cold enigmatic smile. The coal of Howlett's smoke cut a swift arc groundward, his reply so controlled as to be quite lost. Claire's voice came sharply.

"Dad, you shouldn't. Ron—don't be a fool!"

Bootheels crunched. The stalwart cowboy came resolutely toward the Kid. The little outlaw stirred, a cold chill smile touching his features.

This man stood in his way as no other ever had. And now he was coming at him!"

"Steady, Kid," warned Bobcat.

Howlett halted, his feet planted hard on the earth, his voice rough-edged.

"Kid, you come here claimin' friendship for these folks, havin' proved same by killing Mattern, unless that was done only to put another notch on your smokepole. But why are you stayin'?"

Billy Bonney came slowly up, his voice taunting: "Give you three guesses, feller."

Ron brushed the scorn aside. "I guess you came here figgerin' to turn a girl's head with your bold and reckless ways. No can do, Kid."

"Who says no?" snapped the outlaw.

"I do!" barked the cowboy.

"How far you willing to go to back up your wind, Howlett?"

"Clear to the smoke, feller!"

"Steady, Ron!" warned Bobcat Hays. "Better tighten the cinch on that temper."

"Don't worry about me!" raged the cowboy. "The Manning's are my friends, too. They'll come to no good harboring a killer. They believe they're in your debt, Kid, but I'd say you're puttin' 'em in a hole by stayin' here. If you do stay, an' draw the lightnin' down on them, I'll put you in a hole—six feet by three, in the cold dirt!"

The Kid could only stare. Guns and gunplay were part of him. He was used to having men howl for his blood. But never before had a man flung a smashing challenge into his face, and lived. He couldn't understand himself. Why didn't he draw and destroy this cowboy, as he had others who had crossed him?

Without emotion he said: "Too bad, Howlett, we can't see this alike. Too bad you have to put yourself in my way an' tell me how to walk. If I overlook that, every gunie in the Territory will hone to try me out. An' I'll have tuh kill. You gotta go!"

Ron Howlett settled, tense and deadly. All the courage western women bequeath their sons showed in every line of his body. When he spoke, his voice trembled.

"Looks like I've got to kill my first man, Kid. I'm sorry your vanity comes first in

your idea uh things. I'm sorry for both of us. When yo're ready, have at it!"

A crushing silence gripped the ranch yard. Bobcat's rasping breath was the only audible sound.

Baffled, the Kid groped for the reason which prevented his swift draw and the deadly flash of gun-flame. His hands hung lead weights on his arms. His eyes blurred as if some strange fog shut down on him—a confusing mental miasma whirling about the face and form of Claire Manning. Desperately he tried to brush her image aside. He wanted to kill, and he couldn't! "Some other time," he heard himself saying. "Right now the Manning's need us both. Wait 'till it's over. When we're both off this place, then . . ."

A scornful laugh shook the cowboy. He shrugged, wheeled and vanished in the darkness. And the Kid stood there, silently, with the bitter knowledge of what that laugh meant. Ron Howlett was as pleased as if his shot had laid low the coolest killer in the whole Southwest. He had made Billy the Kid take water.

The Kid turned to the silent Bobcat Hays, his own voice plaintive. "What's the difference between us?" he cried. "What can he do that I can't?"

"Nothin'," murmured the oldster, moodily. "But it ain't that. It's what you are, an' what he's not."

For a long moment the Kid stared at Bobcat, seeming to soak in the full import of the foreman's words. Then slowly he turned away to seek his bunk. . . .

At last there came to him a bitter conclusion. He had ridden through life at full gallop, traveling so swiftly the ghosts of his backtrail were left far behind. But now that he had faltered, he could feel their cold breath on his neck. The whole picture of his past rose up to devil him. That past, with its endless violences, lay like a wide and bottomless gulf between him and the one girl he had ever dreamed about.

The echo of Bobcat's words came rushing back: ". . . she's fine an' good an' clean, Kid. An' she's not for you!"

Those words burned into his consciousness. Misery flowed through him in a chill and bitter tide. From a distant hill, the deep-throated call of a lobo wolf pulsated and throbbed its eerie challenge to the night. That weird call tore through the Kid like lead. He turned his face to the black ceiling and a low cry came from him. "Beller, damn yuh! But I won't share your trails no more. I'm done with this outlaw business! I *will* get the chance your brand's denied me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Killers All

NEXT morning the Kid was out early, struggling with a sullen temper whetted to a sharp edge by the unfinished conflict of last night. He resolved firmly to carry to its ultimate conclusion his promise to himself. He was through with outlaw business, forever. He'd have his chance. Yesterday was gone.

When Claire Manning loped in from the Pass, her face flushed, her eyes shining, a pang shot through the Kid. His hate boiled again—hate against Ron Howlett. Strange he thought, that it should shake him so. Stranger still that he could not get a grip on it. He realized for the first time in his life that passions, unbridled for years, cannot be mastered in moments. Aware now he knew that the bitterest fights of his past when guns blazed and death beckoned, were tame compared to this new and untried joust with his own destiny.

He acknowledged Claire's gay salute with the barest courtesy, and turned away. He was glad when Bobcat Hays suggested

they saddle and cut sign for the Rail M mustang herd. If trouble broke there would be need for many fast, range-toughened mounts.

They rigged their ponies and rode a long way in silence. Bobcat was busy with his own thoughts and the Kid meditated upon an unguessed future stretching ahead. Then he turned to Bobcat.

"I did some heavy thinkin' last night, partner," he said. "Decided you were right. I can stand some changin', inside an' out. So I'm givin' up this coyote life I've known. I'm goin' straight an' peaceful from here on out."

He meant it. But when the startled Bobcat looked at him so directly and so long, a wave of heat shook the Kid. Sure it sounded crazy, but he'd do 'er.

Detecting doubt in Bobcat's eyes, he blazed defiantly: "Well—you heard me!"

The old foreman laughed shakily. "Good!" he said. "Now yo're shoutin', Kid." Then, leveling his finger: "Suppose you work yonder arroyo an' cut sign. I'll take the next draw an' meet you on the mesa."

Sullenly, the Kid obeyed. Bobcat didn't believe him, and Bobcat was a wise old man. He laughed, bitterly. If he couldn't convince Bobcat, who would believe him? And he spoke the answer aloud.

"Myself!" he gritted. "I gotta make *myself* believe it!"

Hard work took him out of himself for awhile. Horses broke before him. He gave chase, riding, sweating, cursing, hazing the fractious brutes onto higher ground. The sun beat down with hammer-like strokes, but the little outlaw reveled in it. Here was honest, dangerous work that fitted perfectly into the pattern of his new dream, that strengthened his resolve.

Along about noon he topped his gather out on the mesa and bunched them with Bobcat's. The oldster grinned knowingly.

"'Nough for today, son," he announced. "We'll be back an' give 'em some more tomorrow. Runnin' teaches a hawss brute he ain't as wild as he thought. They're smarter than some men, thataway."

They dipped downward to skirt the protruding toe of the hill, and headed for the Rail M. But when they hit the flat slope running up from Jicarilla Pass they reined in abruptly. Four riders came loping toward them from the Pajarita.

"Whoever from hell is this comin'?" Bobcat queried sharply.

The Kid stared. "One," he scowled, "is that fool Howlett, likely spoilin' for more trouble." He shaded his eyes, leaning forward to study the others.

Something familiar in the set of one of those riders sent a shock through him, then a wave of fierce pleasure fading to the chill impassiveness which neither law nor outlaw had ever plumbed. Although the distance was still too great to be entirely certain, he said: "Strangers from the Basin. They're after me! I'll wait; you go on."

Bobcat snorted. "Not so fast, Kid. Where's them pious ideas about goin' different? If you're really changin', it's you that orta be ridin' outa this. But you won't. If them gents are after you, Basin law is backin' 'em. Which leaves me holdin' cards. I been talkin' tuh ol' John Manning, Kid. Like me, he believes Sheriff Frio Sarg may try to use you for an excuse to attack these hills. If this is it, I'll mebbyso notch my gun-butt right pronto!"

His words stirred again the Kid's old reckless courage, and likewise brought the old bitterness to the fore. He couldn't even help folks without getting them into trouble. As that fool Howlett had said, he was putting John Manning in the hole by lingering. And he was endangering

Claire. Always it was the same. They wouldn't let him keep a promise to himself. He should run, as Bobcat suggested. But . . .

Now the riders were closer. And all the Kid's promises, all his reborn ideals fled from him in a gust of breath. Leaving him what he was, what he had always been—a cold, nerveless fighting machine.

The Kid had recognized that familiar rider. It was Breck Ambridge, one of the Murphy warriors, who must have ridden straight from the dying embers of the Lincoln fight to scent out gun profits of a newer war. Breck Ambridge had ridden with Murphy's murder crew that red day when Tunstall died on the trail from his Rio Feliz ranch to Lincoln town. Breck Ambridge had helped murder that fine Englishman, turning murder in cold blood into an orgy by hammering Tunstall's dead body with rocks and rifle butts. That man Billy the Kid had sworn to kill; he had hunted him relentlessly, but until now had failed to find him.

THE KID'S smile was bleak, but he said no word as the four drew rein. Ron Howlett moved to one side, a strange glitter in his eyes. The others were stiffly wary, their attention riveted on the Kid. A dismal silence fell, broken only by the blowing of the ponies and the rustle of a suddenly chill wind whispering through the dry grass.

Breck Ambridge, arrogant, confident in the odds, smiled crookedly. "H'are yuh, Billy. Long time no see!"

The little outlaw swayed forward, twisting his left shoulder slightly ahead. There was no hint of anger, no trace of emotion in his flat, dry voice.

"Lucky for you, Breck, an' no fault of my own. I've watched the trails for your sign since you killed Tunstall. I've paid off Brady and Hindman for that. Now it's yore time to settle. Yo're a murderin' rat, Breck, an' no good on no part of the earth. So long, feller!"

Bobcat's sharp: "Easy, Kid!" cut through the deadly undercurrent of violence too late. Desperately, Breck Ambridge was trying to match the Kid's draw. He might better have defied the lightning's deadly bolt. The renegade was dead when his hand touched his gun. A purple-edged hole showed in the middle of his forehead.

Death rustled its wings over that red glade then. Breck's companions, deadly gunmen both, were drawing fast. The Kid was bracketed, his pony suddenly terrified, yet he got the first shot away. Bobcat Hays, schooled in every rule of violence, was a clocktick behind the Kid, but still kin to lightning. A man cried out, pitched headlong off his pony to plunge face down on the earth.

The third Pajarito gunman got a shot away at the Kid, the slug ripping the youngster's sleeve. And Billy shot him dead.

It was over. Fate's powder keg had exploded. In two short clock-ticks, death had hovered, struck and gone. Three men lay dead. And Ron Howlett, his face alkali-white, stared into the yawning muzzle of the Kid's gun.

"Well," the Kid said calmly. "You fetched 'em here, Howlett. You want some of it?"

"You fool!" raged Ron. "Yo're gun-crazy. I didn't bring 'em here. They brought me. They're deputy sheriffs, an' all dead because a locoed killer thinks gunsmoke is a cure for range troubles!"

"Shut up!" cried the Kid.

Ron Howlett roweled his pony closer until he practically leaned against the outlaw's gun. "I'll tell it to yuh," the outraged cowboy snapped, "an' it's high time you was told off. You've helled it across this range with sharp spurs so long you think you own it. You kill an' escape death so easy folks figger you must be a little tin

bullet-proof God. I know different. Yo're a crazy little outlaw with more gunswift than sense. You use yore gun-rep to force yoreself on folks who want no part of yuh, but don't dare say so.

"What you just done draws the lightning squarely down on John Manning's head—an' Claire will suffer. Get wise to yoreself, Bonney. Get it through yore head that when a skunk brushes shoulders with honest folks he fouls 'em with his own stick. What side are you on, anyway?"

"I'm on John Manning's side to the last damn ca'tridge in my belt!" the Kid flung back. "An' till the last man dies! You . . ."

Howlett would not be stopped. He even reached out to shove Bobcat aside as the alarmed oldster sought to move between them.

"Looks like it," he sneered. "You ain't only an outlaw yoreself, you've made outlaws outa all of us. An' killers! Why did you shoot these men?"

The Kid's eyes were bleak as glacier ice, but once again he couldn't get around this strange cowboy whose courage transcended his own, who wasn't afraid to die for what he was sure was right.

The Kid didn't fear him, or any other man. But he did fear the unwonted impulse that made him want to defend himself with words instead of gunsmoke.

"Why?" he echoed, icily. "I'll tell you why—but you won't understand. Not until the same thing happens to you. When they do you'll palm yore gun, you'll kill an' kill an' keep on killin' until you've downed the devils that wronged you . . ."

"Like hell!" countered Howlett. "That's for the law to take care of."

"The law!" sneered the little outlaw. "What did the law do for Tunstall when Sheriff Brady decreed his death? Nothing! Did it save McSween? No! Mrs. McSween got down on her knees begging help from the Army—the biggest law in this country. They laughed while they watched her home burn an' her husband butchered. Yeah—laughed! Don't talk law to me, Howlett. Holster law is the best we've got in these hills yet. The badge-totin' sons of coyotes who murdered my friends are answering to me—one by one. I'm not stoppin'—you hear me? Not until I've tallied 'em all!"

He glanced down at the body of Breck Ambridge. "There's one! A Murphy-Brady hellion. A murderin' outlaw totin' a star pinned on him by the crooked lawman tryin' to ruin John Manning."

He turned his eyes to the distant ridges, his voice so poignantly soft it made even the aroused Howlett blink. "No, gents," Billy murmured. "I don't want to kill. But damn their souls, they won't let me stop! They branded me outlaw, poisonin' decent folks against me an' makin' me a target for every bounty hunter on the range. The dice are loaded for me, looks like. All right, then. I'll do what I have to do. Someday, I'll trust a friend too far an' get a bullet in the back. Then, Howlett, you can stop worrying."

Almost savagely, he lifted his pony around and spurred for the Rail M. And when Ron Howlett would have followed, Bobcat Hays shot out a gnarled hand to restrain him.

"Stay away from him, yuh hear me!" he ground out. "Don't devil him no more. He told the truth—every bitter word of it!"

Howlett blazed: "What shall I do? Take down my hair an' cry? His life history don't interest me. All that counts is what he is—a murderin' little outlaw, fixin' to tangle John Manning in a stiff wet loop. He won't get away with it. Not unless he kills me!" He wheeled his pony and lit out for the ranch.

Bobcat, spurring away to noose the dead men's ponies, shook his head and gave one caustic comment. "Good Goddle-

mighty! How kin two kids be so different an' so much alike? Twin brothers under their salty hides an' both headin' up the same mountain by different trails. I wish they could both make it! But that ain't in the cards. One must shorely slip an' fall . . ."

The oldster was still shaking his head as he roped the bodies to their saddles and ran the ponies toward the Pass. Trouble would brew quickly when those cadavers rode into Bonito. And it was already brewing between the Kid and Howlett. What was the end?

CHAPTER FIVE

Call to Peace

TAKING an aimless way from these last two killings, the Kid tried to reconcile the facts with Howlett's accusation. Was he really a menace to the Mannings instead of a help? His mind, trained to doing instead of thinking, seemed locked. Certainly if his presence was inimical to Claire, he'd ride away, no matter how bad it hurt.

But instinct told him that Frio Sarg and Arch Sebastian would eventually make their war without an excuse. That he had furnished them one only speeded the inevitable. They would seize it avidly. Tomorrow's dawn would be blood red. Bitterly the Kid cursed Ron Howlett for leading in those renegade deputies. For playing honest with crooks.

There would be war! And the Kid knew that when the first shot woke the mountain echoes, the hill men would look to him, rather than to their nominal leader, John Manning. No use now to think, plan and argue. Action, raw, swift and courageous, was all that counted now. The stage was set for a powder and lead finale.

So, long before he reached the Rail M, the Kid was fired to battle pitch. There was only one thing to do. McSween had fought a defensive fight, trusting to the right and pinning his faith in God. And now McSween was dead, his battle lost. There was a lesson in that. The war must be carried to Bonito!

At the ranch, a strained silence greeted the Kid. John Manning was there to meet him, his eyes betraying the fact that he knew of the killings.

The Kid's face was a mask as he lit down to face the cowman and as Ron Howlett came from the house with Claire. Bobcat sauntered from the bunkhouse to join the group.

John Manning looked weary, harrassed. He said: "Well, Kid—you've killed again. Men wearin' stars this time. What are we comin' to, son?"

"War!" stated the kid. "The wind's blowin' thataway an' there's no changin' it. Nothin' can stop it. What I did today makes it sooner, that's all." Then, bitterly: "The wolves are on my trail. You want me to leave, Mister Manning?

"No, Billy!" The protest burst from Claire's white lips. "Don't leave us now. We'll need you!"

A warm glow shot through the Kid. Claire was asking him to stay. What if it was only because she feared trouble and had faith in his guns. She was asking him, anyway! In that moment he wondered if she would have thus appealed to Ron Howlett. The voice of the strange cowboy jarred him back to now.

"What do you mean, Claire?" charged Ron. "Let this outlaw go if he wants to. Why ask him to stay, after the trouble he's already caused?" Howlett would have gone on and Claire would have protested, but John Manning silenced them both, turning to Billy.

"I have no hold on you, son, and I won't influence you. I wish you hadn't done it, but as long as you have, I won't holler. From here on, we're all in this together. Nothin' you can do will make one iota of

difference in my liability. If those killin's today mean war, let it be so. We'll fight it out on them lines. I'd just as soon be dead as to be forever under the shadow of those Pajarito outfits."

Ron Howlett jerked around. "Talkin' war won't settle nothin'," he argued. "Fightin' a war will accomplish even less. Lawmen came here today—mebbyso to talk peace. Bonney killed 'em. If he had the guts of a starved jay-bird, he'd take his personal fights off this range, instead of standing by an' lettin' you shoulder 'em. You can't fight the Pajarito an' the law, too. Manning, I'm with you, anyway you want tuh move, but if I was boss here, I'd chouse this Billy the Kid outa the Jicarilla an' take my case before the new governor, Lew Wallace."

Billy moved to face him, his voice dangerously even. "Howlett," he murmured, icily, "you asked me which side I'm on. I told yuh. Now I'm askin' you the same. If I was with Sarg an' Sebastian, I could think of no better way to drive these hill folks off their spreads than yore preachin' for 'em to back down an' take water! Just what is yore purpose here, beside turning these folks against me?"

Howlett's eyes blazed. And the Kid found a certain grim pleasure in the fact that he had touched Howlett's vital spot, had unshackled the youngster's anger. He read hate in Howlett's face, in his tight mouth and quivering nostrils. Mayhap this was the time to settle all that stood between them.

As far apart as the poles, they were alike only in stubborn adherence to what they believed right. In that, and a raw unreasoning courage. If Howlett let his anger drive him to the smoke, the Kid knew that their differences would be ironed out. He almost hoped it would be so, except for Claire. He dreaded rearing a blood wall between himself and her. But if Howlett felt lucky. . . .

But the cowboy didn't draw. He seemed to have forgotten that he even wore a gun. And Billy, watching his rival's holster, was totally unprepared for the smashing fist that crushed his lips, staggering him backward, fetching the salty taste of blood to his tongue.

A silence, pregnant with the threat of death, fell over the spot. The Kid's shoulders settled and he stared at Howlett through a red haze. John Manning stood with wide and hopeless eyes, staring from one to the other. Bobcat Hays took a backward step, his hand going half-heartedly to his gun. Claire, white and tense, recoiled as if she envisioned death there among them. Then her low scream stabbed the silence.

"No, Billy . . . No! You mustn't!" And the Kid straightened, flashed her a bleak smile. The crisis was averted. The simple plea of a girl had succeeded in doing what the laws of society and the command of God had failed to do in silencing a killer's gun.

Then Claire turned like a tiger upon Ron Howlett. "You fool!" she scored him. "Don't you know better than to do a crazy thing like that? Don't ever do that again while you're on this ranch. Never!"

John Manning drew a long, sighing breath. And the Kid was talking unemotionally to him through lips that oozed a trickle of blood. Exactly as if there had been no interruption.

"Don't expect no help from Governor Lew Wallace, from politics or politicians. They're all alike—governors, sheriffs, an' soldiers. Always dilly-dallyin' an' talkin' price. You got just one chance, Mister Manning, an' one chance alone. Gather yore hill men together. Get 'em here before the moon tonight. Smash Sarg an' Sebastian an' rub Bonito town off the

map! You say you want peace. All right, you'll have to go to war to get it."

John Manning was quick to react to the Kid's driving purpose. Such logic was unanswerable, and who knew better than that little warrior—Billy the Kid? He opened his mouth to speak, but Ron Howlett shouted: "No!" The Rail M boss wavered, and thus the die was cast.

"That's a big order, Kid," he murmured, thoughtfully. "It'll take some heavy thinkin'. I better sleep on it."

Howlett grinned acknowledgment of his victory and the Kid flashed him a bitter look. This cowboy was always beating him, standing between him and his aims by an eager willingness to dare sudden and violent death to support his ideas. There seemed no way around him. The Kid turned away, tossing a sullen word over his shoulder.

"That's it, then. You've lost. If you win out finally, somebody's gonna pay an awful price. But remember I told you this, Manning: If grief comes to you, I'll kill the man who's licked you by preachin' pretty words in yore ear. I owe you that much!"

WHEN the outfit was roused at dawn next morning, the Kid's prophecy came smashing home to them. A rider roared into the ranch yard, bloody and wounded, crying out his news.

"Sarg an' Sebastian are gatherin' an army of gunmen in Bonito, plannin' an attack. Three broncs came in last night, their riders dead an' lashed to their kaks. Sarg was quick to lay it onto the Kid!"

"It was the Kid," admitted Manning.

"Good riddance!" murmured the courier. "They was killers, them three. But why didn't yuh foller up a start like that? Why didn't yuh swoop down on Bonito an' whup down their ears!"

The Kid looked from Howlett to Manning, saying nothing. The cowboy was patently scornful. Manning looked sheepish.

"That idea was suggested," he confessed. "An' I was thinkin' it over. Mebby it's best. We'll gather the boys."

"Too late!" snapped the messenger. "Last night you could uh won. Now it's suicide. They smoked me up an' shot Tom Williams tuh pieces. It's open season on hill men from here out. They've got regular guards posted. Usin' the Kid, they say, makes us outlaws. Our only hope is to wait for them to strike. If we fight back they intend callin' troops to help 'em. No, Manning, we lost our taw by waitin'."

After which declaration he fell from his pony, a victim of weariness and bullet shock. They packed him into the bunkhouse and put him to bed.

For a long moment, the Kid and Ron Howlett looked at one another. In the end it was Howlett who turned away, muttering: "Where is the right in this thing? Killin' only means more killin'. Violence don't measure up to peace. How do they fit together?"

And the Kid turned carelessly away to gaze down the valley, trying to conjure up the end of this affair, wondering how that end might affect Claire and himself. He well knew that Frio Sarg had a legal right to come here looking for him. Sarg was the law. He knew from bitter experience that anything Sarg did in these hills, no matter how brutal, would be upheld. Right now, unless the Jicarilla men destroyed him, they might as well move out. Halfway measures would fail. Perverted authority was against them. It must go, wholly and complete. A cruel and bloody reasoning, but one written indelibly on the pages of history, in blood.

Brooding thus, the Kid roused as the echoes of a gun blast came tumbling from the rimrocks. And a blinding flash flickered across his eyes, disappeared and winked again.

He came up abruptly, gazing down the long slope toward the pass. A dust bomb lifted yonder, the sun rays glinting from its vortex. Blue showed through the dust, and the Kid cried out: "Troopers!"

His warning caused them all to stare at that moving cavalcade of men. And as they watched, Billy the Kid, suddenly inspired with a chill and impassive deadliness, looked to his gun and backed into the bunkhouse.

The others, he could see, felt the same awe for these blue-coated troopers that he had once felt before the Lincoln debacle. In the face of the soldiery, the hill folk would renounce friendship. Yonder cavalrymen were after him. And he must fight alone.

Minutes dragged. The troopers roared into the yard, swung down, slapping dust from their uniforms. A grizzled officer stepped up to John Manning, touched his cap, nodded to Claire.

The Kid couldn't hear what was said. John Manning's head tipped toward the bunkhouse. Claire riveted her attention there. A look of relief flooded Ron Howlett's face. Cold tides of warning poured through the Kid. He held his pistol full cocked and ready.

The officer wheeled, started toward the bunkhouse, every eye following him. Billy let him get half way. Then, without warning, dropped a shot between his polished boots. It stopped him abruptly, drained the color from his face.

"That's far enough, Bluecoat!" snapped the Kid. coldly. "About face an' go back to yore drills an' play battles. Leave fighting to them that have something to fight for!"

The officer stood straight and undaunted, stirring a grudging admiration in the Kid's breast.

"Are you William Bonney?" the officer asked.

"The same!" sneered the Kid. "What about it?"

"I've come to you," returned the officer, "from Governor Lew Wallace. He has commissioned me to escort you to Lincoln for a palaver."

The Kid laughed, mirthlessly, "An' you think you can net me with that song an' dance, Army-man? Guess again."

"This is not an arrest," the officer hastened to add. "It's an honest invitation from the governor, who wants to talk to you. He's studied the Lincoln County trouble, has talked to the men of both sides. He's convinced there's some right and a lot wrong on both sides. He's offering amnesty to all who will agree to walk peacefully from now on. In other words —giving everybody a clear bill who keeps peace. As man to man, Bonney, it's your big chance to bury the past and ride out with all debts paid. What do you say?"

With almost a snarl the Kid said: "I say *back up!* In ten seconds I'll raise my sights three feet. Yore Lew Wallace is new to this country, an' he's damn green if he thinks I'm that simple. Tell the great governor to go to hell! An' you do the same! Git!"

FOR several seconds the Army man stood his ground, a look of honest pity on his bronzed face. Then, feeling the menace beyond that portal, he wheeled and strode back to the house.

His brief report sent Claire running swiftly to the bunkhouse. Never had she looked so beautiful, so desirable. Never had her approach so unsettled the Kid. He eyed her hungrily as she came to him. But outwardly he was hard.

She was breathing fast as she halted before him. "Listen, Billy," she pleaded. "You've got to do this. It's the biggest chance that has ever come to you."

"Biggest chance to kick at the end of a rope!" he amended, his voice reflecting

past experience. "You want me to hang?"

"No!" she cried. "But I think this is an honest offer. I believe this new governor wants to help you." Her hands gripped his arms. "Don't you see, Billy? You must do it. It's your chance to be forgiven and free—like other men. Your chance to quit a coyote existence and settle down to friends, a home, a good woman and the better things of life. I want you to do this, Billy!"

The Kid was profoundly stirred by her pleading, by the warmth in her eyes. A strange emotion touched him, shook him to the bottom of his soul. He gulped, groped for words, his voice rough edged.

"Friends?" he brooded. "Tunstall was my friend, and so was McSween. Where are they? What if I do get a clean bill? You think the gents that hate me and hunt me now will let me be? Murphy, for instance. An' what good woman could care for me?"

"Hush, Billy!" Claire pleaded softly. "I care!"

"You!" he cried. A new light flashed into his eyes, then faded as he looked narrow-eyed at the girl. "How much do you care? If I do take this chance an' clear myself, what will that make me in your eyes, Claire? Will you marry me, help me make the home I've come to want? Will you help me find the peace I've fought and killed for? Will you do that?"

A frightened look flooded Claire Manning's eyes. The color slowly faded from her face. Tears welled from the corners of her wide eyes, to inch slowly down her cheeks.

"Yes, Billy!" she choked. "If you'll meet the governor and clear yourself . . . I'll—I'll marry you! I promise!"

Then she was gone, racing across the intervening distance and into the house. And she left the Kid stunned, feeling little of the mad rush of exultation that men come to know when their dreams become reality.

Something was lacking, but he knew not what. His joy was tempered with a sagging weariness that made each movement an effort. Alone in the bunkhouse, he fought for steadiness.

"She promised," he said half aloud. "An' she'll go through. But what is the cost?" Across his memory swept the lonely challenge of the lobo wolf and Doc Skurlock's mournful prediction: "There's no finish to our lawless job. A good woman is not for you, Kid!"

With a shrug, he forced a reckless smile and walked boldly out to face the soldiers, his hand swinging close to his gun.

"Tell Lew Wallace," he stated coldly, "I'll meet him!"

"Fine!" beamed the officer. "You can ride in with us and have your talk this afternoon."

"I'll ride alone," countered the Kid, crisply. "I trust no man, let alone a soldier. Tell the governor I'll see him on the main street, at three."

"Very good!" the officer said. "I don't blame you, Bonney, knowing as I do the odds you've bucked. I hope this meeting will breed peace and a better understanding all around. Good day, sir."

The Kid nodded, turned away toward the corrals. Somehow he felt better. New hope throbbed in his veins and the lure of a new life beckoned. Hate was dead in his heart, and he was glad he'd stayed his hand.

CHAPTER SIX

Smoky Trail to Peace

AT the outskirts of Lincoln town, Billy the Kid drew rein for one brief moment, his eyes running over the town with the wary glance of a wildling. Save that the sun was westering, Lincoln seemed to have only paused since the red moment death had called him in the patio of the McSween home.

He could see the ruin now, the shambling, smoke-charred walls crawling with memories that would live forever in his mind. It seemed that the gun echoes were hardly stilled; that they waited only his arrival to begin again.

The place was quiet, brooding and menacing. Blue-coated soldiers patrolled the streets. Lincoln was an armed camp, with tents on the flat, horses, and officers' ambulances.

The Kid touched his pistols, grimly loosened them in their leather. Beside his own Colt, he carried one borrowed from Bobcat Hays. And across his lap slanted a saddle carbine. He trusted no one. If this was a trap, someone of importance would die before he did. He touched his pony with the spurs, trotted slowly, warily in. A stir ran through the group lounging before the Murphy store, and the Kid cocked his rifle. Was this a rendezvous with the new governor of New Mexico—or with death?

Deadly calm, he rode down that main street alone, daring his enemies with his eyes. Pacing sentries snapped to attention, their guns at ready. And all the go-to-hell recklessness of the Kid's nature showed now.

Very slowly, Billy came on, his pony's hoofbeats stridently loud in the silence. Calculating his chances, his eyes quested along the building fronts for sight of the great man who had summoned him. Now he saw him before the Ellis House, standing arrow-straight and smiling beside Juan Patron—*jefe* of the town—and several high-ranking officers of the Army.

A distinguished looking gentleman, intellectual, scholarly, Territorial Governor Lew Wallace was the only friendly face in an unfriendly town. He radiated trustworthiness. His iron-gray hair, his flowing mustaches and beard gave him an air of distinction and command.

But to the Kid he was only a man. Lead would kill him, just as it had slain Tunstall, Brady and McSween. The great died as easily as lesser men.

Without a backward glance, the Kid passed the Murphy store and felt the impact of a deathless hate. Everyone there had once lined sights on him and all had missed. Scornfully, he gave them his back. They did nothing.

At the Ellis House the Kid swung down, walked briskly up the steps. Juan Patron whispered to the gray-bearded man, nodded to the Kid. Then Billy was facing Lew Wallace, his cocked rifle gripped tightly, a sullen and combative stare in his stony eyes.

The governor stepped forward. He said: "So you are William Bonney?"

"Billy the Kid," the little outlaw corrected. He brushed the official's outstretched palm, grasped his rifle again. "You sent for me an' I'm here. What's on yore mind?"

The sinking sun slanted a beam across Lew Wallace's rugged face, accentuating the deep fire of his eyes, his solemn purpose. Like the Kid, he was not one to talk in circles. He said:

"Billy, I'm calling a truce between those who took part in this feud. I want you to help me. I want you to stop this fighting and killing. I want you to settle down to useful citizenship. Those are my desires in this matter and I've come all the way from Santa Fé to present my case."

The Kid shied away from the blunt proposition. It was too sweeping; it sounded too simple.

"Settle down?" he echoed. "What makes you think I can?"

"Why can't you?"

"Suppose my enemies won't let me?"

The governor showed impatience. "You can go away to a new country where no one hates you," he pointed out.

The Kid bridled. "No! I won't run away. *This* is my country. I've as much

right here as you—or the Murphy crowd."

The governor shrugged. "All right, Billy. Hate dies. Just now you rode right past the very men you've fought. They made no move against you."

"Reason enough," sneered the Kid. "Two on my hips and one in my hand. One move against me and some of them would have died. They knew it. If I had come without guns, they'd have saved you this talk."

The governor sighed. He seemed like a man hurled back from a thick wall, but doggedly determined to go on. "Those men," he said, "have promised what I'm asking you. They've agreed to cool down their hate. They're tired of fighting, fully aware of its uselessness. Like me, they want peace in these hills."

Distrust was obvious on the Kid's face and in his whole bearing. He looked along the street to the hills beyond. This land was broad, clean, built for peace. He too was tired of war. Lew Wallace seemed strong. There seemed a chance that he could bring this to pass. The Kid relaxed.

"Governor," he said, "what you want tuh see happen is what I've fought for—peace. The only difference between us is that you can order armies to do your bidding and I fight my own battles. That makes you the governor—an' me an outlaw. A wide gulf, governor. An' deep!"

THE official sensed his gain. "Surrender yourself to me, Billy. Stand trial for your crimes. In case the trial goes against you, I promise you a pardon. The real difference between us is age. You're a boy and I'm a man. I have wisdom that will come to you with the years. Trust my judgment. This is a new land of opportunities. You call it yours. Make it so. Shape your destiny by your action!"

Life spoke to the Kid then, offering him of its fullness. He had Claire's promise if he met the governor's offer. He had a great man's word of a pardon. Rushing gladness coursed his veins. He lifted his head, acquiescence on his lips, but he didn't speak.

A rising murmur swept the town. A dust cloud shot skyward at the street end. A racing pony plunged through it. And Ron Howlett hit dirt before the Ellis House.

Spotting the Kid, he ran toward him, his face contorted. "Billy!" he cried. "Kid, thank God, I've found you!"

The Kid whirled down the steps to meet him. From the cowboy's manner, something was terribly wrong.

"What is it?" he barked. "What's eatin' yuh, feller?"

Howlett glanced at the staring governor and his aides and lowered his voice. "It's happened!" he whispered, fiercely. "They got John Manning an' Bobcat!"

"Got 'em?" the Kid echoed. "What do yuh mean—'got 'em'?"

"Arrested 'em! Sarg came up with a dozen deputies an' a warrant! Took 'em down to Bonito, charged with harborin' an outlaw an' accessory tuh murder!"

Wild emotions surged through the little outlaw. Anger that Frio Sarg had struck in his absence. Hate for Ron Howlett, whose preachings had precipitated this catastrophe. The old deadliness gripped the Kid, but he checked it, trying to think dispassionately. If Sarg had jailed John Manning, the Jicarilla was leaderless and Claire was without protection. Those things must be remedied, then he'd pay off Ron Howlett, as he had promised.

The Kid's face turned to granite and his brittle gray eyes bored Howlett like hot gimlets. "Yeah!" he sneered, "an' what were you doin' while all this was happening?"

"I wanted to make a fight of it! The hands were willin', but John Manning held us back, figgerin' tuh fight things out ac-

cordin' tuh law. They won't last longer'n a snowball in hell in that wolf nest!"

"Thanks to yore pious preachin's, Howlett," broke in the Kid, his voice frozen edged. "Before I left, I told Manning I'd kill you if yore crazy notions got him into trouble. That goes, feller. But first there's work to be done. We ride to Bonito!" He whirled, moved toward his horse.

The governor's command rang out: "Billy—wait!" And when the Kid turned impatiently, he said: "What is all this? Can I do anything?"

Impulsively, Billy Bonney strode back to face the executive. "Yes," he said, frigidly, "you can. John Manning, as honest a cowman as ever lived, is in the Bonito jail for harborin' me, an outlaw. By your own words, Governor, you stand willing tuh give me a clean bill. All right, I'll make a swap with you. I'll give you the promise you ask, then I'll be no outlaw. An' you send the soldiers to Bonito to release John Manning."

Lew Wallace's kindly eyes clouded. Slowly, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Billy. That is a matter for local law. I cannot interfere."

The Kid's lip curled. Mature thought or argument might have convinced him that the governor was right. But now, in a wave of bitterness, he saw only the impotence of this—the greater law. It had always been so in his experience. He laughed harshly.

"For a few minutes, Governor," he said, icily, "I thought we were getting together. But it can't be. My enemies won't let me, an' my enemies are always right—seems like. Mebby I'll see yuh again. . . ."

"You mean!" cried the executive, "you won't agree to—!"

"—nothin'!" snapped the Kid, and leaped for his horse. As he whirled the beast, he threw his hand high in a defiant gesture. Then he and Ron Howlett were roaring out of town in a cloud of dust toward the shadow of his dark destiny.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Warrior Rendezvous

THE KID set a killing pace across the hills, riding the spurs. When Ron Howlett warned him that his pony was failing, the little outlaw bit off a merciless laugh.

"What the hell!" he rapped. "This is a case of man-flesh against horse-flesh! Which are yuh interested in savin'?"

The cowboy's answer was a savage lift of his spurs that scourged his weary pony to a renewed burst of speed. They thundered on, their mounts foam-flecked and heaving, eyes glassy.

By the time they reached the Seven Up ranch, the pace had slowed sadly. The animals were through. Billy the Kid turned through the gate of the big cow outfit.

"What yuh gonna do?" barked Howlett.

"Steal some fresh horses," grinned the Kid, savagely.

Billy knew he wasn't taking much chance. There would be no cowboys around the outfit this time of day. If the owner interfered, hell was full of such. He swung down before the corral, unsnapping his rope from the saddle. Intent upon his purpose, he let himself inside where a cavvy of saddlers milled. Howlett didn't follow him.

When the Kid came out with the first mount, the cowboy was coming from the house with the owner.

Billy's face hardened and he speeded the saddling, then darted back into the corral to fetch out another pony.

"Hold on, there!" the owner of the Seven Up bawled. "You can't take them broncs without—"

He halted his protest, turned pale and gulped. Horror bloomed in his eyes as he

looked into the muzzle of the Kid's gun.

Billy said: "You was sayin'?"

"Nothin'!" choked the cowman, and turned back toward the house.

The Kid holstered his weapon. To Howlett he said, "Switch yore kak to this brute. We've wasted too much time here already."

"He don't want us tuh take these string ponies," the cowboy protested. "They're personal hawsses—the best stuff he's got."

"Fine!" snapped the Kid. "The best ain't none too good. Change that saddle or stay here an' wrangle with ol' Seven Up Hodges. Me—I'm headin' for the Jicarilla."

He palmed his rifle, mounted and rode away without a backward look. It took Howlett ten minutes to catch him on his fresh mount, patently displeased that he had been forced to take the Kid's judgment. Without further words they rode on to the Rail M, reaching there as dusk spread its dingy wings across the peak-bordered Jicarilla Valley.

As he swung down at the corral, Billy the Kid swept the ranch yard with those chill, all-seeing eyes. The four Rail M cowhands stood near the bunkhouse door, hard-eyed, gun-hung, brittle of temper. Claire came rushing from the house, dressed like a man, a carbine in her hands.

A few feet from the Kid she stopped, her eyes searching his hungrily, as if to read what lay behind the hard mask of him. Howlett, she seemed not to see at all. She was pale, and the marks of her grief were deeply graven on her oval face.

"Billy!" she breathed. "You've come at last! I've been so helpless. Now you can tell me what to do."

Every line of her piquant beauty tended to soften him. Yet he remained hard, for there was a hard job ahead. Man work and gun work. He told her harshly: "War never changes, Claire. I've told you all what to do. There's no other answer!"

The four hands were striding up with rattling spurs. "That's all we want tuh know, Kid!" cried one. "Lead out an' le's peel the jail off the boss-man an' Ol' Bobcat. We'll foller yuh tuh hell an' back!"

The Kid eyed them with scorn. "This ain't no two-bit war, boys," he said levelly. "This is a fight to the finish, a fight for a new order!"

Still watching them, he fell silent and thoughtful. There was no leadership now in the Jicarilla. And war without a leader was like a cowboy without a horse. And so, because he had always led, he snatched at the reins of leadership as naturally as smoke flies upward. Neither Howlett nor the girl challenged him.

"If John Manning's gonna be saved," he snapped, "it'll take speed, speed an' more speed. Kill yore ponies raisin' the Jicarilla outfits. Shorty here will have fresh mounts ready for us in the Pass. Claire, you raise the Music Mountain outfits. Howlett, you ride to the Rafter A an' the T J Connected. Buck takes the Circle Dot, Hawssfly the Tincup spread. Tassel, you stir out the boys uh the Cross Anchor Bar. I'll fetch the fightin' men of the Bee Bee an' the Heart K. Tell 'em to come a-runnin'! Tell 'em we're goin' to Bonito after Sheriff Sarg an' Arch Sebastian. Tell 'em anything—but get 'em to the Pass! An' two hours is your deadline. If you ain't there then, we'll be gone."

They scurried to obey, but the Kid didn't wait. He swung away at a lope, heading for the hills. And as the afterglow waned, the trails of the Jicarilla echoed to the clatter of flying hoofs, to the shouts of loping horsemen relaying the word to the cattle clans of the highlands: "War! We're carryin' the fight to the Pajarito! Oil yore guns an' fill yore belts an' meet at the Pass at ten!"

THROUGH the starlight the hill warriors gathered in Jicarilla Pass. Grizzled, scowling cowmen, unduly silent and

heavy with hardware. Fiercely grinning youngsters, aflame with excitement and impatient to fight. By threes and fours they swept to the rendezvous.

First came Claire Manning, riding straight and grim beside Long-gun Gillen—son of old Giles Gillen of the Boxed G. Behind them trailed eight warriors from the three Music Mountain spreads.

Shortly after, Ron Howlett rode in with six hard-faced, reckless riders of the Rafter A and T J Connected—rodded by Tommy Justin of the latter outfit. When someone asked young Tommy about his aged, fire-eating sire, he laughed.

"Ol' Gord Justin is plumb outa this fight, gents. He's crippled up with the miseries an' his heart's skippin' beats. Medico's orders was for him to stay in bed. But if I hadn't hid his guns an' clothes in a haystack, he'd uh put on the ol' warbonnet an' come faunchin' along to carve hisself a few more notches. At that, don't be surprised if he comes ridin' tuh war in the raw."

Deacon Dalrymple, in sombre black vestments came riding in with Manning's Buck cowboy and three of his own Circle Dot punchers. Deacon Dalrymple with a rifle across his saddle bows, a Bible bulging in his pocket and murmuring his stern and righteous preachments: "An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth! Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord! What the hell we waitin' for?"

Now from the north end came Billy Bonney, riding like a demon, leading in seven fighting men from the Bee Bee and Heart K outfits. They acclaimed him, nor was there any division in their recognition of his fitness for leadership. But the Kid was undemonstrative, moving away into the shadows—his face morose, his hungry eyes fixed upon the girl who paced beside the campfire.

They waited. Time dragged interminably. Men talked in whispers, consulting thick, nickle-cased watches and throwing nervous glances along the trail into the Jicarilla. Someone raised a cry: "Almost ten o'clock."

Claire stirred, turned to face the Kid, then moved into the shadows to join him. "Billy," she said, and there was a plaintive note in her voice. "Tell me—how did you come out with the governor today? What happened?"

The Kid's voice came through clenched teeth, low, controlled. "He offered me a clean bill, Claire, if I'd promise to hang up my guns."

The girl gasped, stiffened as if she paused on the brink of a chasm where she must move with extreme caution. "Did—" she asked breathlessly "—did you promise?"

"John Manning an' Bobcat Hays are layin' in the Bonito jail . . . or swingin' from a limb?" he said fiercely. "Hang up my guns? Do you want that, Claire?"

She hung her head. Then her eyes came up to meet his. They were brave eyes; eyes of the pioneer woman who played her own stirring part in the winning of the West.

"Billy," she said, "I made you a promise based upon your meeting the governor's terms. That your loyalty to my own flesh and blood caused you to break our contract can't be held against you. My promise stands. No matter what the outcome tonight, I go where you go."

She turned away, strode past the fire, her shoulders back, head erect. And so she came to where Ron Howlett stood broodingly beside his horse.

For minutes the two of them talked, the unintelligible murmur of their voices stirring strange currents in the breast of Billy the Kid. Then, impulsively, Claire's hand flashed out to grip that of the cowboy and she turned away abruptly.

Fire seemed to flow out of Ron Howlett. His head tipped forward, his shoul-

ders sagged. He was licked. The spectacle sent a fierce pang of pleasure through the Kid. He had bested the cowboy at his own game, beaten him. In taking Claire he had hurt Howlett more than if he had whipped him in a fight.

Howlett groped for tobacco and paper, rolled a smoke. The first long drag seemed to straighten him, to restore his poise. His head came up. Thoughtfully he paced across the intervening distance, coming to a stop a yard from the Kid. Instinctively, Billy settled. He had tasted the temper of this strange youngster's steel before. He was taking no chances now.

But very softly, Ron Howlett said: "Claire told me, Kid. It hurts because it was fixed between her an' me before you came along. She's a fine girl, deservin' of a better man than either of us. Be good to her. Take her away from this country and yore past. You can never be worthy of her; neither can I. But try, Kid. Try an' make her happy. Now, I'd admire to congratulate you an' shake hands."

A strange conflict of emotions shook the Kid. His face went hard as he put his hand behind him. Coldly he said: "Because of them sentiments, Howlett, I'd admire to shake yore hand. But I can't—not yet. With yore soft talk of peace, you've put the Jicarilla in a hole. A lot of these men are gonna die tonight where we could've won easy yesterday. Yeah, an' saved John Manning an' Bobcat the chance of a hangnoose—or a shot in the back. I gave my promise to kill the man responsible if harm came to them. Now—"

"Ten o'clock!" bawled someone.

"Now get yore pony. After this is over—if we both come through. . . ."

He turned away to seek a fresh mount, leaving Howlett white-faced and angered, staring after him. Everywhere men were swinging up, milling around nervously. Hawssfly and Tassel came plunging in on lathered mounts, eight Tincup and Cross Anchor Bar warriors thundering behind. They reared to a halt, swelling the Jicarilla man count to forty fighting men.

Every eye turned to the Kid. He gave them back that look, thrilling to the confidence and trust he found there. His hand shot high, his pony wheeled, and with all fighting warriors of the mountain valley lifting their war cries skyward, they roared through the Pass. Carrying the war to Bonito. Ready to give their all to lift the iron hell of oppression and prostituted law that gloomed their lives.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"To the Last Damn Cartridge!"

RIDING like madmen, the aroused Jicarilla ranchers swept down upon Bonito. Outside the town, Billy the Kid flung high his hand to bring his warriors plunging to a stop. Ahead, where pale lights marked the business center, lanterns bobbed. And striking through the silence came the blood-chilling hymn of aroused blood-lust; the mutter of the hangmob.

Claire cried out and muttered curses welled from the throats of the riders. Someone cried: "Good God, Kid, why we waitin'! They're takin' out John an' Bobcat! Le's get at 'em!"

The Kid was icy cold. "String out!" he ordered. It's spur an' cut an' shoot. No need my tellin' you how. No quarter asked; none given. Line out!"

"Amen!" added Deacon Dalrymple.

Grimly silent, the men fanned out, waiting for the Kid to lead. Billy shouldered his pony alongside Claire. "You'll wait here," he ordered.

"No!" she protested. "My father's in there. I'm going in!"

No answer from the Kid. No time to argue. His voice lifted. "At 'em, cowboys! Go!"

Rebel yells beat upward. The long line jerked forward. Spurs sang; horses grunt-

ed and squealed as they leaped. And as Claire started the Kid's hand flashed, down and up. Fire ran from his weapon, and Claire's mount shrilled its death agony, shuddered from bullet shock, then toppled sideways as Claire stepped clear.

Over the roar of the charge, the Kid felt the girl's swift hate pound at him as she shrieked: "You gun-crazy killer. . . !"

But she was out of it, and the Kid was content.

On a tidal wave of passion, the Jicarilla men swept into town. Already men sped from its borders, spreading the alarm. Braver spirits stood before the mad rush. Gunfire licked at the Kid. He gave it back and ran his pony over a fallen foe.

The lynch-fired townsmen were scuttling for cover. Billy led his warriors into their midst, firing with unruffled timing. The town boiled over with fury. Bullets wailed down the main street like gale-borne sleet. The savage clamor of guns beat skyward, reverberating from the building fronts and echoing across the flats beyond. Curses, death screams, and the raw profanity of aroused men!

The Kid sought the shadows, fighting as he ran. Firing, loading, firing again.

Deacon Dalrymple, hatless, coatless, sided by his three Circle Dot hands, charged the muzzle flames winking from the Desert Saloon, with the Kid's blazing guns between them and the charging enemy. At the door they wavered, faltered, then swept in. There, for a brief moment, the conflict flared inhumanly, then died. The Deacon came reeling out, dragging two of his boys, the guns of the Desert defenders stilled forever.

A hurtling figure took the Kid's eyes from that drama. Frio Sarg came straight at him, hurling blasphemous challenges. "The Killin' Kid! Hornin' into my game! Take it!"

Billy laughed, swayed aside, tilted the muzzle of his piece. And with the cool savagery he donned when death beckoned, he drove a slug into the distorted face.

Sarg's fall seemed to touch off a new savagery in the fighting. Jicarilla men were storming the jail, gunning down the defenders, trampling them and ripping the door from its hinges. A minute later, John Manning's hoarse orders were lifting and Bobcat Hays was snarling his battle cries.

Someone torched a building, the red flares lighting the violent scene. And now into that rising glow swept a lone horseman, his quavering whoop sheering through the gun turmoil. Thin and old and gray bearded, a whipping red blanket was the only thing to cover his nakedness. He wore no boots, and his weapon was an ancient Hawkins rifle.

As gunfire streaked at him from a dark window, the oldster gave it back. A shrill cry attested his aim and he was plunging crazily on, tilting powder into the barrel of his piece on the dead run, ramming home a slug and firing again. A dozen guns targeted him, dropped him heavily into the dust. Ol' Gord Justin had cheated a faltering heart, earned another gun notch and died as he had lived—fighting!

That sacrifice fired the hill men. The hirelings of Sarg and Sebastian faltered. John Manning was shouting orders, and the Kid, flattened against a building front, was content to turn over the preëmpted reins of leadership. He had a job to do—an important engagement with Arch Sebastian.

Scorning the deadly but diminishing fire, the Kid prowled the shadows to the rear of the Bonito Bar, where Uriah Mattern and his two bodyguards had fallen under his guns not so long ago. A sagging stairway led up the outside. Slowly and calmly, the Kid climbed it.

THE upper hall was dark, menacing, as the Kid passed one door after another until he reached the front. A knob

gave to his hand, and he looked at a hulking figure silhouetted against the fire-glow striking through the window. There, a dreamer of empire stared down upon his crumbling hopes. Wrapped in his own sombre thoughts, Sebastian was quite unaware of the Kid's entry.

Billy Bonney spoke: "Sebastian!"

The range hog whirled, tipping forward to stare at the dark portal. "Who is it?" he croaked. "How's things going?"

"It's the Kid," came Billy's low, deadly voice, "an' things are goin' damn bad for you. Yo're finished, Sebastian. See you in hell!"

He waited until the man struck at his holster. Then drove six slugs into the Pajarito man's thick body. Arch Sebastian was dead. Frio Sarg was dead. It would be a long time before the security of the Jicarilla men was threatened again. They had won. Unlawfully, they had accomplished what the law had failed to do. Now, they were the law.

For a long minute, Billy the Kid stood there. On the street the crash of guns died away.

Slowly, the Kid reloaded his hot weapons and descended the front stairs. In the narrow portal he stumbled over two stiffening forms, their dead faces looking terrible in the glow of the conflagration—Buck and Tassel, two loyal Rail M men. They had been his friends. For a long moment he regarded them woodenly, then stepped to the walk. A voice hailed him. It was Tommy Justin, his eyes heavy with grief.

"They got my old man, Kid! The Deacon's shot tuh hell, but he's mebby tough enough tuh pull through. Bobcat's stopped two slugs in his leg. John Manning's down—dunno how bad. It's a mess, Kid. I've counted eight hill men that won't never ride no more."

John Manning down! A red rage gripped the Kid. That was Howlett's work, and it called for payoff. Grimly, Billy walked on, scanning each huddled body, half fearful that fate had cheated him.

A crawling figure drew him. A man dragging a limp leg through the dust, moving painfully as if at the limit of his endurance. Then with a desperate, despairing cry, he stretched out full length, rolled over to turn his face to the sky. It was Ron Howlett!

At sight of the Kid, the cowboy's mask of pain dropped away. He smiled crookedly as he raised himself on his elbows.

"How're yuh, Kid!" he croaked. "Well, you got yore belly full uh blood tonight! An' I can see in yore eyes that yuh like the salty taste of it an' want more. Yo're honin' tuh kill me as yuh promised. All right, have at it. Gimme a hand! Prop me up against yonder wall an' we'll draw —even!"

That staggered the Kid. Howlett, shot to doll rags, was defying him—the deadliest gun in New Mexico. He shifted uneasily. Sullenly, he said:

"Well . . . yuh see any good reason why I shouldn't kill you? Somewhere yonder lies John Manning, mebbyso dead by yore damn preachments of peace. I don't owe you a chance, Howlett—I owe you a gut shootin'!"

Howlett's eyes blazed. "Kid," he said, "yore a killer. No killer can understand that there's a better way than war. You'll never understand that this blood is yore doin's, not mine. What if I did preach peace? What if I did delay a massacre, an' in delayin' it, mebby caused the death of John Manning an' Bobcat. You think that would have brought me pleasure? No! But out of their passing would have come a new order, decent law and a lasting peace to the range."

"Hogwash!" sneered the Kid. "You've talked big to turn a girl's head!"

"I talked peace," corrected the cowboy, "because I believed it, because I

wanted to save Claire this. And because I love her—something a cold killer can never understand!"

"Them things did you no good, Howlett. We won our fight, an' I won Claire—"

A low cry and a patter of running boots in the dust broke into the Kid's boast. Billy turned. Into the glare of the crackling fire came Claire Manning, breathless and fearful. She paused beside the Kid, yet failed to see him. Her eyes were for the maimed man in the road.

"Ron!" she breathed.

"Claire, honey!" Howlett flashed her a wan, pain-torn smile. Then his strength failed and he sank into the dust.

With a stricken cry, Claire knelt beside him, gathering his head into her arms and murmuring things the Kid couldn't hear.

Something profound touched Billy Bonney in that moment; he could not have told what. He was suddenly embarrassed in realizing that he stood in the presence of something greater than himself, greater than Howlett. Something fine and clean and pure—that could never be for him. Doc Skurlock had read it right in the lobo's call.

Shamed, rather than disheartened, the Kid turned away, his eyes on a rein-tied pony. A group of hill men were moving up the street, assisting John Manning.

"Hey!" called Long-gun Gillen. "Where yuh goin', Kid?"

"Tuh hell!" cried the Kid, sullenly.

"I don't blame yuh, Kid. Yore ruckus tonight will bounce tuh Santa Fé an' back. They'll burn the trails for yore carcass. Make yoreself scarce!"

The Kid laughed bitterly. This was their payoff. He was a gunman; they had used him. He rose to the saddle, struck the mount savagely with his spurs. As the horse flashed away he took one last look at Bonito—light as day now as tongues of flame licked skyward. Men moved about the street, caring for the dead and wounded.

But one stood apart, his arms wrapped around an awning support to take his weight off a bullet riddled leg. Ol' Bobcat Hays, who unblushing owned to a feeling of kinship with the wild-born young killer of the Pecos, lifted his hand high. Hail and farewell!

The Kid's hand flashed in answer as his pony carried him out into the prairie.

Beyond the gloom, a lobo wolf bawled mournfully. Billy Bonney smiled ironically as he reined toward the sound, brothers under the stars. Both facing red extinction, the carnivore, with a bawled challenge, and the gun-storm maverick with a scornful smile on his twisted lips. . . .

THE END

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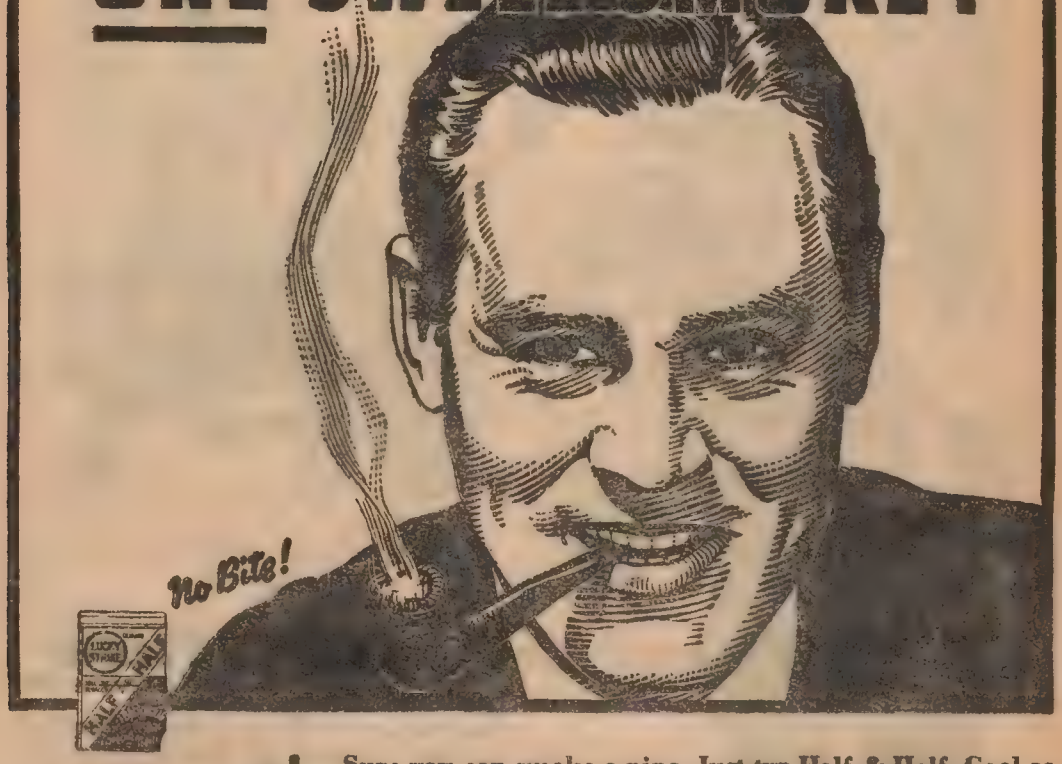

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HALF AND HALF

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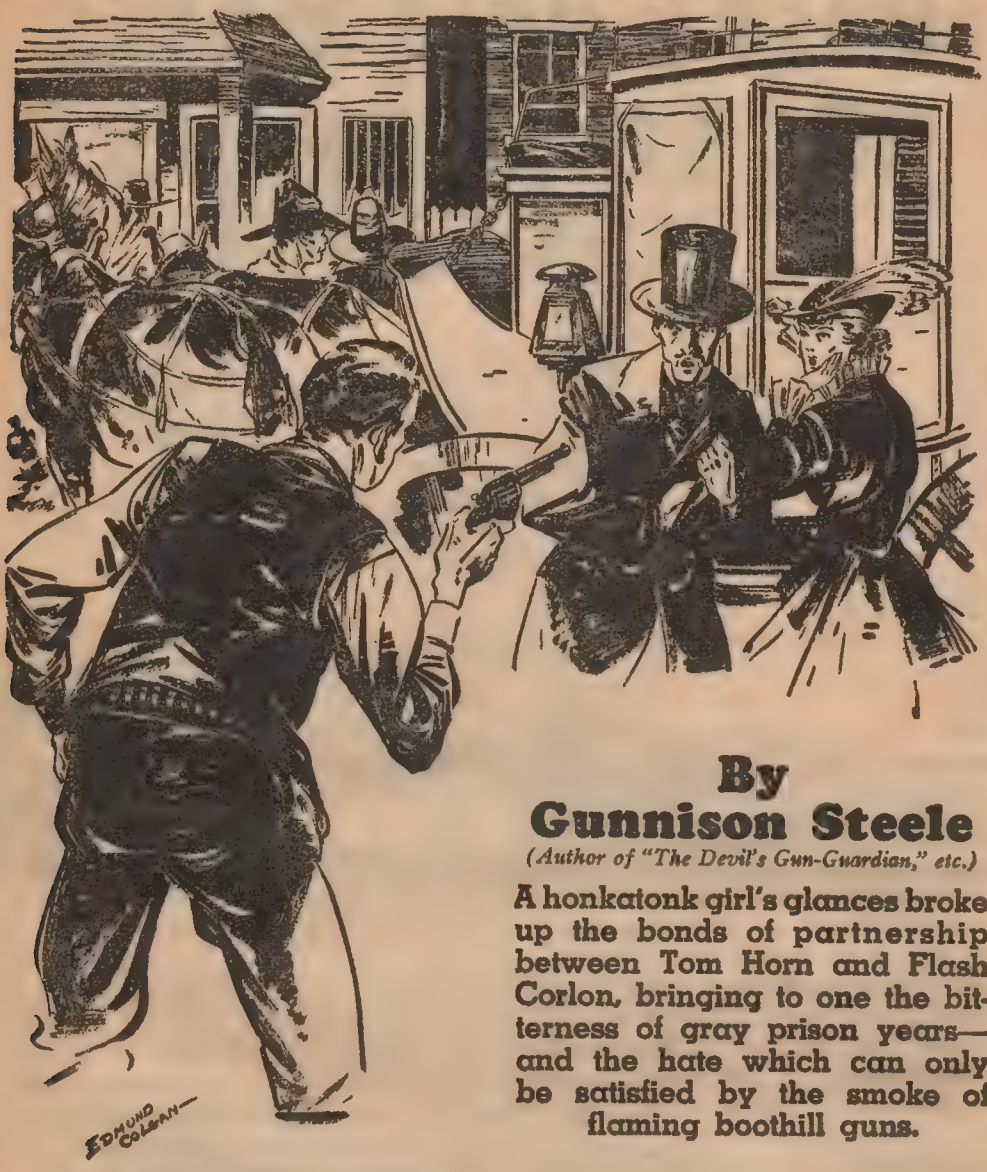

By Gunnison Steele

(Author of "The Devil's Gun-Guardian," etc.)

A honkatonk girl's glances broke up the bonds of partnership between Tom Horn and Flash Corlon, bringing to one the bitterness of gray prison years—and the hate which can only be satisfied by the smoke of flaming boothill guns.

OLD MULEHIDE BOONE came from the gaudy-fronted honkatonk, a quart of whiskey in one hand and a suitcase in the other, and walked with stiff dignity toward the waiting Concord stage. The gnarled old stage driver was drunk—but not too drunk to grasp the significance of Jubilee's quiet, deserted street, and the import of the strained faces at shadowy windows. Not too drunk to know that a man was about to die.

Old Mulehide leaned with a show of carelessness against one of the mules, and sneaked a nervous glance back toward the saloon and dance hall he had just left. Then he looked at the two grim-eyed men who stalked with slow, measured tread toward each other along the middle of the rutted street.

A hundred feet still lay between the two men, with Mulehide and the old Concord almost exactly halfway between. But

Mulehide could see the fierce hate shining in their cold eyes and on their set, ruthless faces.

Drunk or sober, the old stageman had never missed pulling out on the dot, and he didn't aim to let a gunfight prevent it now. He flung another anxious glance over his shoulder, wondering why his passengers hadn't followed him. He fumbled with the cork in the quart bottle.

There was something awful in the way these two gents were coming toward each other, savage eyes staring straight ahead; in the way they walked, stiff-legged, unhurried, bodies rigid. The measured thud of their boots in the hot dust sounded thunderous.

Mulehide lifted the uncorked bottle to his lips. He knew, as did those who watched with tense eyes from the safety of the buildings, why Tom Horn and Flash Corlon were about to face each other through powdersmoke. He knew something else, which neither of these proddy gents knew—something that would maybe stop this gunfight if they knew. . . .

But neither old Mulehide nor those other watchers could guess at the confused thoughts that hammered at the brains of Tom Horn and Flash Corlon as they stalked stiff-legged toward each other. Tom Horn, big, blond, solid as a deep-rooted oak—and Flash Corlon, slim, cat-lithe and graceful, almost dudish, with restless, reckless fires glowing in his flashing black eyes.

They both were thinking the same things, seeing the same fleeting pictures in their minds as they walked toward each other. Incidents of the last five years, while they were saddle-mates and partners in the rich little Hourglass outfit over on the Lost Squaw, as they fought side by side to surmount the barriers that man and Nature had placed before them; through blazing summer and freezing winter, sharing the same blanket, the last bite of food, the last drop of water—siding each other with fist or gun when the going got rough.

But it was something else that was burning and hammering with a wilder beat in their brains. It was the reckless, staccato click of tiny high-heeled slippers on a polished table-top that was goading them on. They were seeing in their mind's eye, a slim, red-haired, laughing girl, swaying and whirling like a golden lance of flame as she danced to the rythmic cadence of the strange, wild song that came from her red lips. They were seeing her short skirts billowing away from soft, silken legs, seeing the lamplight crawling in her reddish-bronze hair. Like the sting of strong wine was the memory to them of her slim, soft body in their arms, of the kisses from her warm red lips. Like the silvery tinkle of a bell, they each were hearing her low, teasing laughter as she professed her love for them.

Yuma Rose, queen of the honkatonk girls who danced the nights away at the Silver Cow, had played Tom Horn and Flash Corlon for suckers. In a short month, she had changed them from buddies who always shared their joys and troubles to a couple of flint-eyed gents who hated each other with all the savagery of which their untamed natures were capable. For all the time, while she led them on, Yuma Rose had been madly in love with someone else—with Faro Jack LaRue, who had a layout in the Silver Cow. . . .

THE batwing doors of the Silver Cow flapped open, letting a man and girl onto the sidewalk. The man was gaunt, black-garbed, hawk-faced, with eyes like chunks of black ice. The girl was slim, with reddish-bronze hair and tawny eyes. The two paused an instant, their eyes probing along the street.

Faro Jack LaRue appeared nervous, his

movements jerky. When he turned as if to go back into the honkatonk, Yuma Rose grabbed his arm and pulled him into the street. Almost running, they went toward the waiting stagecoach.

Tom Horn and Flash Corlon, no more that thirty feet apart now, stopped suddenly in their stiff-legged shuffle. Their hot eyes flicked aside and stabbed at Faro Jack and Yuma Rose. And in that instant they both knew that Yuma Rose had played them for suckers, that she loved neither of them.

Faro Jack was trying to watch both the Hourglass men at once. It was plain that he was scared, and had been reluctant to leave the shelter of the Silver Cow.

There was a hard, amused look in Yuma Rose's golden eyes as she snapped at old Mulehide Boone: "Well, gran'pa, let's get started. You said you wanted to get away on the dot, didn't you?"

A sort of frantic haste in his movements, Faro Jack started to get inside the stagecoach. But a low, raspy voice lanced the hot silence.

"Just a minute, tinhorn. Turn around —so I won't have to gun yuh in the back!"

The stark menace in that voice whipped the gambler about. It was Flash Corlon who had spoken. The lithe, black-haired buckaroo was moving slowly toward the gambler, furious anger boiling in his reckless dark eyes. Tom Horn stood braced, a little way off, a hurt, bewildered look on his craggy face.

Flash Corlon stopped. He said to Yuma Rose: "You played me for a sucker, and I guess I am one. You're a woman, you can get away with it—but no yella-bellied tinhorn card-slick can, and live. LaRue, grab that shiny pop-gun you pack under yore arm!"

"Wait—wait!" stuttered the gambler. "I'm not armed—I'll show you. . . ."

Faro Jack's slim-fingered hand flicked his black coat open. Mulehide cursed, ducked. Yuma Rose screamed.

Flash Corlon's hand was a brown blur in the sunlight. A gunshot boomed out harshly, and Faro Jack LaRue tumbled forward on his hawkish face, empty fingers clawing at the hot sand.

With a low moaning cry Yuma Rose flung herself to the ground beside the dead tinhorn. She turned Faro Jack over, tore open his black coat. Then she glared up at Flash Corlon.

"You murdered him," she cried harshly, accusingly. "He told the truth. Look —he didn't have a gun!"

"IN SENTENCING you to fifteen years in the State penitentiary for the killing of Faro Jack LaRue," intoned rawboned old Judge Trotter, "this court is being lenient. The fact that you killed in the heat of passion, thinking your victim was armed and prepared to defend himself, does not excuse the act. I know your heritage of wildness and violence, Corlon. But too long has your friend, Tom Horn, been allowed to extricate you from your numerous escapades, as he has tried faithfully to do in the present case. Now you must pay your debt to the Law. Have you anything to say?"

Flash Corlon stood wolf-lean and defiant before the stern old judge. A torrent of bitter words rose in his throat, but he fought them back and shook his head.

As Sheriff Jason Baxter led Flash from the court room, Tom Horn placed a hand affectionately on the prisoner's shoulder.

"Buck up, ol' son," he grinned. "Fifteen years ain't such a long time. And besides, I'm not gonna rest till I get a pardon or parole for yuh!"

Flash Corlon flung the hand savagely away.

"Keep yore dirty hands offa me," he spat. "I don't want your help. I ain't through with you, not by a damn sight. I'm comin' back, and when I do. . . ."

They jerked Flash Corlon away along the corridor, leaving Tom Horn standing there with that hurt, bewildered look in his blue eyes. He couldn't savvy Flash at all lately.

They'd been ready to gun each other for a while, all right. Yuma Rose, with her red-lipped smiles and her soft, slim body, had done that to them. But that was past now. He'd gladly have gone to the pen in place of Flash Corlon, for if Flash hadn't killed Faro Jack, he would have.

He couldn't savvy why Flash still hated him. But he knew that Flash's hating him made no difference. Five years they'd been saddlemates, and they still were. . . .

They carried Flash Corlon up to the State pen to begin his fifteen year term —took him to those bleak, wind-lashed gray walls, where life was a living hell. The first few months were the hardest. Flash Corlon had fiercely loved the wide plains, the cool mountains, with the wind and sun against his face and the blue sky close overhead. Now, shut away from those things he loved, there were times when he thought he would go mad.

Flash Corlon was hard. He could stand the brutal kicks and curses of the slave-driving guards, the back-breaking labor. It was the stinking filth and sun-blasting heat, the wind and sand and silence that he dreaded. And the savage *sautanas,* those frequent waves of wind-driven sand that moaned out of the desert, tearing and lashing at the hot, gray walls, sifting into clothing, food and water, bringing long hours of confinement in a narrow, dust-choked cell.

For Flash Corlon, death would have been a thousand times easier. Yet he wanted to live, to go back to Jubilee and wreak savage vengeance on Tom Horn and those others he had called his friends.

During the first year, Tom wrote often. Flash read the first letter. Prospects were good on the Hourglass, Tom wrote. And already there was talk among the Jubilee ranchers of a petition to be sent to the governor.

Flash read the letter through, and sat a long time, his face tight and gray, staring at a checkered patch of sunlight sifting through the bars. Then fiercely he ripped the letter to pieces; savagely he cursed Tom Horn, Jubilee and Yuma Rose. That same day he was placed in solitary confinement for smashing a guard to the ground with his fist.

After that, Flash destroyed Tom's letters without reading them. Once, three months after they sent him up Tom came to see him. But the big, blond buckaroo stayed only a few minutes. He went away, the eager light gone from his blue eyes, sobered by the gaunt, heat-warped ghost of Flash Corlon—appalled by the hate in his bitter eyes, by the harsh curses that Flash hurled at him.

After that, Tom came no more, and he stopped writing.

Flash Corlon missed those letters, even though he had destroyed them unread. Somehow they had seemed the last connecting link between this blazing hell and the freedom he so desperately longed for.

ESCAPE from the State prison was considered almost impossible. On three sides of the little prison town was open country; on the west the waterless desert reared a flaming barrier of sand and soul-searing heat. Of the possible dozen men who had scaled the prison walls, all had chosen the desert as their only chance for escape—and the bones of most of them were out there now, bleaching white under a savage sun.

Three years passed. . . .five. . . .

Flash Corlon saw the hell-house break other men. Saw them shrivel and die of hopelessness, or go mad and crash their brains out. But Flash Corlon was tougher than the sand and silence and hot, gray

walls. He was harder than the cold and wind and labor. Flash Corlon lived only for the time when he would go back to Jubilee.

It was in Flash's fifth year in prison when they brought Big Jorg Pitts in. Big Jorg had been sent up for life from Flash's own range, the Jubilee, for bank robbery and murder. He was massive of head and body, flat-faced, arrogant.

For some reason, Big Jorg was drawn to Flash Corlon. But Flash disliked the big lifer from the first, despite their many confidences exchanged in the tight-lipped jargon of the Big House. Big Jorg had been a member of Dick Scarlett's outlaw gang, with a hideout up in the Buckhorn hills north of Jubilee. He told Flash just where the hideout was, and how to get there.

"I'll meet you there," he grinned, "when we're outa here."

"We ain't got wings, have we?"

Big Jorg looked all about him, carefully. "We won't need 'em. Never was a place that couldn't be busted. Listen."

And he told Flash of a plan that he and Kirk Vane, another lifer, had hatched. Vane was a wiry, rat-faced little gent that Flash disliked even more than he did Pitts.

The plan was all right, so far as getting them outside the walls was concerned. "Then there'd be the desert," Flash pointed out. "You couldn't beat the desert without water—and you couldn't take water outa here."

"We'll beat the desert!" Big Jorg cursed harshly. "Hell, I thought I was doin' yuh a favor, lettin' yuh in on this. You looked like a gent who was willin' to take a chance."

"I'm willin' to take more than a chance," Flash Corlon said softly. "But I don't think we'd have a chance that way."

So when Big Jorg and Vane made their break, he stayed behind. The break was made at mid-evening from the quarry yard, just as a yellow *santana* was moaning in from the desert.

A loaded truck was making for the yard gate, when the two lifers suddenly clubbed a couple of guards with pieces of cut rock. Seizing the guards' guns and holding the half-conscious men between themselves and fire from the buckshot loaded man-killers in the hands of other guards, they made it toward the open gate through which the loaded truck was just passing. The very recklessness of the attempt got the lifers outside the gates.

Whistles suddenly shrieked out the strident warning. Waves of yellow sand rolled in. A man-killer bellowed out from a corner tower. There was a confused uproar as other guards herded the howling and cat-calling convicts back to their cells. There was gunfire, the wild, weird wailing of the prison siren, thundering gusts of wind. . . .

LESS than a year later, Flash Corlon faced the gaunt, gentle-eyed old prison warden in his office.

"You're leaving here, Corlon," said the warden kindly, "after serving only six years of your fifteen year sentence. The governor is granting you a pardon. The judge who sentenced you, and numerous other persons on the Jubilee range recommended the pardon. But it is largely through the efforts of the sheriff of Jubilee that you are now a free man. These six years are behind you, Corlon. Don't leave here with bitterness and hate in your heart, with the idea of getting even. Get an honest job, and stick to it."

"Who'd give a jail-bird a job?" Flash asked sardonically.

"See the sheriff in Jubilee," the warden advised. "He's your friend. You don't belong here, Corlon. Some men are born criminals, and will die bad. Big Jorg

Pitts and Kirk Vane, for instance, who escaped less than a year ago. Stay clear of their kind, Corlon."

Free! But it wasn't exactly as he'd dreamed it. Broodingly, as he stared from the window of the train that was carrying him southward, Flash Corlon regarded the panorama of sweeping plain and towering mountain, the tinkling streams and herds of cattle with tails to the bitter wind. This was home to Flash Corlon, but the bitterness in his heart wouldn't let him see the golden beauty and peace of it.

He left the train at Frye's Junction, ten miles north of Jubilee. Not far away the Buckhorn hills lifted dark and unfriendly against the chill gray sky. Up there was the hideaway of Dick Scarlett's outlaw gang, where Big Jorg and Kirk Vane had said they'd meet him.

Flash had some money which the warden had been keeping for him for six years. He bought a rangy dun horse, a pair of long-barreled .45's, a second-hand but serviceable range outfit to take the place of the cheap suit he wore. Little thrills shook him as he caressed the shiny gun-butts.

The sky was low and overcast as he rode out of Frye's Junction, and a biting wind blew down from the hills. The feel of snow was in the air. A mile south of the Junction, the trail forked—one branch going on to Jubilee, the other crawling like a wounded snake off toward the tawny hills.

As he hesitated there at the forks of the trail, Flash Corlon thought of what the warden had said: "The sheriff is your friend, he'll take care of you." Flash had puzzled a great deal over that. He'd never counted old Jason Baxter, who'd testified against him at the trial, a particular friend.

Flash thought of Tom Horn and the

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Hourglass, only a few miles to the south, that the two of them owned together. Tom would have made the outfit pay during these six years, and that meant that Flash Corlon would have money in the bank, sleek cattle on the winter range. For Tom was too damned honest to pull anything underhanded.

But, long ago, Flash Corlon had decided that he wouldn't go back to Jubilee. He still hated Tom Horn, he told himself, and those twelve men who had judged him guilty of murder. And Yuma Rose. . . . Flash grimaced. He had almost forgotten why he'd killed Faro Jack LaRue.

MEMORY churned Flash's heart with fresh bitterness. He spurred the dun suddenly down the narrow, winding trail —toward the ragged hills.

But, as he rode on, he didn't feel just right. That feeling of freedom and fierce triumph that he'd anticipated, wasn't there. He felt like something was trying to pull him back. He kept thinking of Tom Horn's open, happy grin, of the hard days and frolicsome nights they'd spent together.

He remembered other things. The time Tom had fished him from the raging Wildcat Creek with a wet rope. And the time, almost ten years ago, when Tom's kid sister—a gawky, long-legged girl with pig-tails—had come out from Denver to spend a week at the Hourglass. She'd hung around Flash Corlon a lot during that visit, and had thought him pretty much of a hero. She'd cried and kissed him goodbye when she left. Flash caught himself grinning as he remembered the youthful worship in the kid's blue eyes as she looked up at him.

Then he jerked his mind back to the present, and spurred the dun viciously on.

He could hear a low moaning sound beyond the hills. He pulled his heavy sheepskin coat about his lean face and urged the dun on, for he knew the icy fury of the blue blizzards that swept the Buckhorns. Soon after he entered the foothills, a drift of sleety snow started. The blasts of wind became colder, and a blue-black twilight settled over the hills.

The gloom deepened in Flash Corlon's heart as he rode deeper, as he visioned the future with Dick Scarlett's outlaw gang—days of peril, lonely nights of brooding in the red glow of hidden campfires, with maybe a nameless grave in the wilderness at the end.

But in turning outlaw he was fighting what he considered the law's blind injustice in the only way he knew. By joining up with Scarlett's raiders, he would be able to wreak vengeance on Tom Horn and the other Jubilee ranchers.

The gloom deepened, the snow thickened. The screaming wind cut like a knife. The blizzard's fury filled the hills with weird, crying noises.

A red spark showed suddenly through the driving snow. The dark bulk of a big log cabin loomed, huddled back under the wind-breaking walls of the canyon which Flash Corlon had been following for the last twenty minutes. Nearby were two or three smaller, shed-like structures.

Without trying for silence, Flash dismounted, slogged through the loose snow to the door and rapped. Footsteps sounded inside, and the door was flung abruptly open. Big Jorg Pitts' massive figure stood limned in the lampglow behind him, a sixgun in his hand, burly shoulders hunched forward as he peered at Flash.

Big Jorg grinned suddenly, said, "Flash Corlon, by Gawd! Come on in where it's warm, feller. Men, here's the gent I been tellin' yuh about."

Flash went into the warm, lighted cabin. His gaze flicked about the room. Three other men besides Big Jorg were in the big room, seated about a rickety table that

held a smoky lamp, a deck of greasy cards and a quart whiskey bottle. One of the three was Dick Scarlett, squat, buck-toothed, cruel-eyed, with stiff reddish hair sprouting from his hawkish face and stub-fingered hands. Another of the three was the wiry, rat-faced Kirk Vane. The third man was lean, dark-faced, with icy, calculating eyes.

Instantly Flash sensed something tense, unnatural in their actions. They were staring at him, hands on gunbutts. But there was a distant, vacant look in their wolfish eyes, like they were having trouble focusing their minds on him.

THEN Flash saw the reason. Over against the wall was a bunk, and on the bunk was a girl. A slim, golden-haired girl whose blue eyes were wide with nameless dread, whose beautiful face was blanched with the fear that clutched her. Dusky shadows skulked about the bunk, but Flash Corlon saw the brief flare of hope in her eyes as they probed desperately at his face.

A faint prodding of memory stirred in Flash's brain as he looked at the girl, the feeling that he had seen her before.

"Hell, Corlon," Big Jorg laughed coarsely, "she ain't no ghost! Here, get some whiskey inside yuh, and some grub, then I'll tell yuh about it. You cross the desert like me and Kirk did?"

Flash took the whiskey bottle that Big Jorg held out to him. "I was pardoned," he said shortly. He took off his sheepskin coat and stood near the glowing pot-bellied stove.

"This gent wants to join up with us," Big Jorg told the burly outlaw boss. "I knew 'im in the pen—he's plenty salty."

Dick Scarlett licked his thick lips, growled, "He's too late. You know damn well we're fixin' to split up and get outa the country. We can't stay here after this deal."

Flash strove to hold his voice careless. "Who's the girl?"

Big Jorg's greedy little eyes turned toward the bunk.

"Why, that's Sheriff Tom Horn's sister!" he chuckled.

Big Jorg's words beat like powerful blows at Flash Corlon. And, suddenly, he knew where he had seen the girl. Ten years fell away, and he was back on the Hourglass while a gawky, long-legged girl with pigtails, hero-worship in her blue eyes, followed him about and asked questions.

With an effort he jerked his mind back to the present, asked, "Since when did Tom Horn get to be sheriff?"

"Four-five years back, after old Jason Baxter was gunned. He's the hombre that hounded me to the pen. Hell on law and order, that gent is. But I guess he'll talk turkey now, since we've got his purty sister.

Sudden anger surged over Flash Corlon. "What's she doin' here?" he demanded.

"We gutted the Jubilee bank two days ago, cleaned 'er out down to the floor. Ike Mooney, over there, had been in town gettin' the lay of things. He'd found out that this skirt was the sheriff's sister, and that she worked in the bank. So, when we'd cleaned out the bank, we brought her along. It was my idea. We left a note in the bank for the sheriff, tellin' him that if he trailed us into the hills he'd never see her ag'in. Savvy?"

Flash Corlon nodded, grinned. But the four renegades couldn't know the confused thoughts that were tumbling through his brain, the inexplicable anger that was churning inside him.

"You've got her—what now?" he asked.

Big Jorg Pitts grinned wolfishly. "Why, we've decided to split up the swag and get outa the country, just as soon as this bliz-

zard lets up. But only one of us could take the girl along. We was lettin' the cards decide who got her, when you showed up."

For the first time, Flash noticed four small stacks of matches on the table. Tiny bits of wood—but the stake was a lovely, golden-haired girl with terror in her young eyes!

"We're wastin' time," clipped the cold-eyed Ike Mooney, impatiently. "Jorg, it's yore deal."

"Too bad you can't take a hand, Corlon," Big Jorg grinned. He went to the table, dropped onto a vacant box. "Make yoreself comfortable—this game won't last long!"

Flash moved away from the table, into the shadows. He wanted to get where he couldn't see the desperate plea in Elaine Horn's blue eyes. He saw now that her ankles were bound with rawhide thongs.

AS long minutes passed, Flash listened to the bleak beat of the blizzard about the cabin, to the low flick of cards, the growled curses of satisfaction or disappointment as luck changed among the four wolf-faced gamblers. The animal passion in their eyes, the fact that they were gambling for the girl, sent anger surging like a muddy stream through Flash Corlon's heart. His lean, dark face was haggard with the battle that raged inside him.

Silently he berated himself. He had lived through six years of hell, buoyed by dreams of vengeance against Tom Horn—and here was a golden opportunity for more complete vengeance than he had ever dreamed of.

But, instead of the fierce triumph that he should have felt, memories plagued him. Incidents of other days, as he rode side by side with Tom Horn, paraded through his brain. The time when a bunch had ganged him in tough Ysleta, and Tom had arrived to wade with bludgeon-like fists, drumming his righteous anger among them. Barging through fun or trouble they had always been together. Then he remembered that gawky, big-eyed girl as she followed him about the Hourglass; the feel of her shy young lips on his as she said goodbye on the station platform.

But Elaine Horn wasn't a gawky, long-legged kid now—and she was in deadly peril. And Tom Horn was sheriff. Tom knew the breed of Dick Scarlett and Big Jorg Pitts—he would be somewhere in these storm-lashed hills, right now, looking for the skunks who had carried off his sister.

Flash Corlon stirred restlessly, sneaked a glance at the gamblers. Big Jorg and Kirk Vane had been eliminated from the game; they watched sullenly the slow, tense play between Dick Scarlett and the icy-eyed Ike Mooney. Occasionally Big Jorg glanced at the slim girl on the bunk.

Finally the big renegade got to his feet and went over and stood looking with a loose-lipped grin down at Elaine Horn. Flash, watching, saw the girl recoil slightly from the giant, saw her gaze come quickly to him in mute appeal.

The instinctive decency in Flash Corlon struggled with the bitterness in his heart. He was tasting vengeance, and the savor was bitter.

He tried to think of the six years of hell that he had endured, but could remember only that Tom Horn had been his saddle-mate and had worked those six years to get a pardon for him; that this slim, golden-haired girl was Tom's sister, was the shy, gangling kid who had cried as she kissed him goodbye almost ten years ago. . . .

The girl's sudden scream jerked Flash Corlon to his feet. Elaine Horn was cowering back against the bunk. Big Jorg stood over her, one hairy paw out-stretched, his thoughts naked in his staring eyes.

Flash Corlon's voice was flat, harsh

with the rage that lashed him: "Jorg, you lousy skunk, turn around!"

Warned by the deadliness of that voice, Big Jorg pivoted, clawing for his gun as he whirled. Flash's own gun came out fast, and its red lance of flame blasted Big Jorg back across the bunk.

Hard on the boom of his gun, Flash heard the girl's warning scream. He twisted aside, eyes swiveling to the table. Scarlett, Vane and Ike Mooney had reared to their feet. Mooney's gun was clear, snaking up, and Flash felt its fiery breath on his neck as he ducked. He smashed into the wall, regained his balance and braced himself on wide-spread legs.

The room rocked red with gunfire as the three renegades leaped apart and started triggering their guns. Flash Corlon faced them, grinning, his scarred guns roaring their red requiem. A fierce thrill surged over him. For the first time since leaving the pen, he felt free.

Ike Mooney clawed at his stomach, went spinning about the room. Dick Scarlett and Vane stood close together, wrapped in spirals of powdersmoke from their snarling guns. Then suddenly Vane dropped his gun and slumped to the floor.

At the same instant red-hot pain slashed at Flash Corlon's head. Black waves of nausea rolled over him. He spun back against the wall, fighting to clear his head, to throw off the paralyzing pain that held him helpless. Through boiling mists of agony, he saw Dick Scarlett's savage, triumphant grin. He saw the squat outlaw's gun, levelling on his heart.

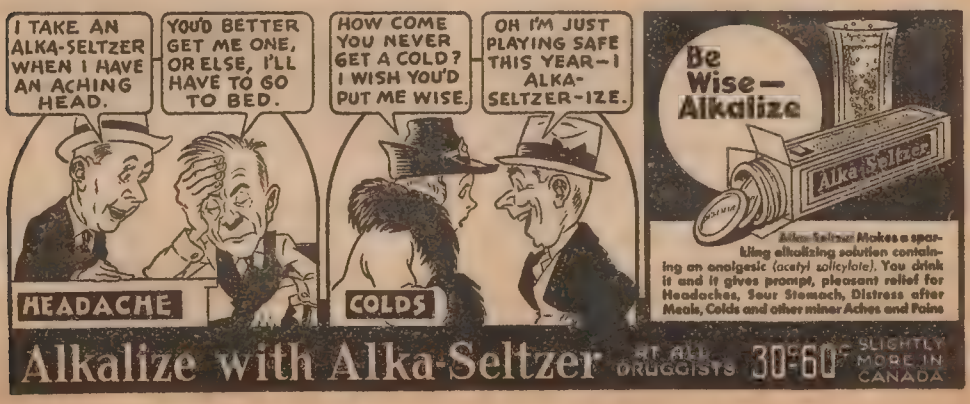
Sudden, smashing sound beat at him from across the room. Amazed, he saw Dick Scarlett go reeling about the room, then crash to the floor and lay still.

His gaze turned to the bunk. Elaine Horn was sitting upright, almost on top of Big Jorg's inert body, and Big Jorg's smoking pistol was steady in her hand. Gradually Flash's brain stopped spinning, and the nausea left him. He stood a moment, staring through the billowing gunsmoke at the golden-haired girl.

Elaine Horn was smiling slightly, a happy, almost proud light in her blue eyes as she looked at Flash Corlon.

"I knew you'd come through, Flash," she said softly. "And I stopped being afraid, the minute I saw you. You see, I remembered—that Flash Corlon I'd known ten years ago. Why don't you untie me, so I can bandage your head?"

Flash Corlon didn't say anything as he went toward the slim, blue-eyed girl. He was too happy. He felt just like any gent, who has been gone a long time and comes back to find home a better, sweeter place than it was before he went away. . . .


I TAKE AN ALKA-SELTZER WHEN I HAVE AN ACHING HEAD.
YOU'D BETTER GET ME ONE, OR ELSE, I'LL HAVE TO GO TO BED.
HEADACHE
HOW COME YOU NEVER GET A COLD? I WISH YOU'D PUT ME WISE.
OH I'M JUST PLAYING SAFE THIS YEAR—I ALKA-SELTZER-IZE.
COLDS
Be Wise—Alkalize
Alka-Seltzer
Alka-Seltzer Makes a sparkling alkalizing solution containing an analgesic (acetyl salicylate). You drink it and it gives prompt, pleasant relief for Headaches, Sour Stomach, Distress after Meals, Colds and other minor Aches and Pains
Alkalize with Alka-Seltzer
AT ALL DRUGGISTS
30¢ 60¢
SLIGHTLY MORE IN CANADA

The Murder Bronc

By Walt Coburn

(Author of "Brand of the Blind Gunman," etc.)

A grim and silent ghost from the twisted back-trails of the past, Bill Riggs, crippled bronc-peeler, rode back to bring his own boothill judgment against the hard-driving renegade boss of the Hammer outfit—and to exact strange payment for one man-breaking ride on a wild killer horse!

THE third time the big line-backed dun called Hornet threw Bill Riggs, the man lay there for a minute or two in the corral dust. There were tiny puddles of blood in Bill's ears and his nose bled into the powdery yellow dirt. When he got to his feet a little groggy, his right arm dangled awkwardly, broken at the elbow.

"What are you tryin' to do, Riggs?" said big Grant Smith from the top of the pole corral. "Spoil a good horse?" He was the owner and ramrod of the Hammer outfit that owned the Hornet outlaw. Grant Smith bragged that he could ride any horse in the Hammer remuda or whip any man he hired and fired. And the Hammer outfit hired only tough cowhands.

Bill Riggs wiped the smear of blood and dirt from his face with the shirt sleeve of his left arm. He spat out a mouthful of blood and looked up at the faintly grinning Grant Smith.

"What'll you take for your spoiled horse, mister?" he asked. Bill Riggs'

Pays Off

A Rangeland Tragedy You Will Long Remember

gray eyes showed like slits of steel from his dusty, blood-smeared face. That big dun outlaw had jarred the bronc rider badly and he felt pretty sick.

"Show me the color of a hundred dollars," said Grant Smith flatly.

"You done sold a horse," said the bronc rider. "I got that much in my warsack at the bunkhouse."

Bill Riggs turned and walked across the corral as the big yellow colored horse trotted around with the empty saddle, and the hackamore rope trailing in the dust, snorting. He halted with a jerk as he stepped on the trailing rope, stirrups flopping. Bill Riggs reached the far side of the corral and leaned against it, bending over a little, vomiting blood.

Two or three of the Hammer cowboys quit the top of the corral and took hold of him. A couple of others unsaddled the line-backed dun outlaw.

Grant Smith, tally book and catch-rope hung on his arm, got down and went into the big corral where he was giving each man his string of horses for the fall roundup work.

"A couple of you men look after Riggs." He dismissed the bronc rider without the formality of a word of sympathy. "When a horse breaks a leg," he grinned faintly as he went into the big corral where the remuda milled in a slow circle, "I shoot him."

That was Grant Smith's way. Most men hated the big Hammer ramrod. Some of his enemies claimed he had a streak of yellow buried in his make-up. But no man had ever found it and brought it to light.

Bill Riggs went to town on the stagecoach that stopped at the ranch for the mail. The stage driver let him lead the Hornet outlaw and his private horse behind the coach on its fifty-mile trip to town.

Bill Riggs was the only passenger. Despite his broken arm and the nausea that would not leave him, the bronc rider rode up on the driver's seat. The four horses hauled the swaying, rattling, creaking old coach over the long, rough road.

BILL RIGGS had spent all but ten dollars of his savings for the big dun colored outlaw. It would be weeks before he would be in any kind of shape to break broncs or punch cows, because it's work that calls for two good, strong arms. It was September now, and by the time his arm was strong enough to permit him to go back to work, he'd be facing a Montana winter and no job in sight. But Bill Riggs was a bronc rider and cowpuncher, and tough. He grinned gamely as the stagecoach took the chuck holes with a lurching that made him sick. His splinted arm throbbed with dull pain.

"You didn't last long at the Hammer," said the garrulous old stage driver.

"The first horse that Grant Smith feller give me, throwed me."

"That Hornet horse hasn't *never* bin rode, son. He's throwed the best bronc peelers in the country. He's five years old and they bin tryin' to ride him since he was three. Grant Smith likes to give him to strangers like you. Hell, it's no disgrace to be throwed by that Hornet bronc."

"Grant Smith brags that he can ride any horse that wears the Hammer brand," said Bill Riggs. "I heard him make that talk in Chinook when I hired out to ride his rough string."

The grizzled stage driver chuckled. "But you'll notice that the Hornet bronc ain't branded. No man's brand on his yaller hide. And Grant Smith has never even put his saddle on Hornet. He always claimed he'd ride Hornet till the horse dropped dead under him if there was money enough laid on the line to make it worth his while. Grant Smith is foxy thataway."

"And in other ways," added Bill Riggs through bruised lips.

"Mebbyso you knowed Grant Smith before he come to Montana," ventured the old stage driver shrewdly. He loved gossip as he loved his horses and whiskey.

"Mebby," was Bill Riggs' reservation on that subject.

But the old stage driver whose only name seemed to be Limpy, was a good judge of men. And he was certain that this young bronc rider with the broken arm was holding back a lot.

By his saddle and his soft drawl old Limpy spotted his crippled passenger for a Texan. Nor was he far wrong. Bill Riggs hailed from just across the Texas

line, in Oklahoma. But he had done most of his cow punching in Texas and his double rigged saddle bore the name of a Texas saddle maker.

Bill Riggs was tall, well made. His hair was straight, straw colored, his eyes a gray that looked steel blue in the sunlight. His face was blunt-jawed, good-humored, a little too short of nose and wide of mouth to be considered good looking. He grinned, showing big white teeth. Men liked Bill Riggs and accepted him easily as one of them.

Old Limpy cussed Grant Smith for an overbearing son of a black bull. And bet that there was a streak of bad Injun in the Hammer ramrod.

"He's got hair and eyes like a damned Apache. And when he's drunk he's uglier'n a teased rattler. The Injun in him oozes out like poison. He's rode more than one horse to death. He's a snake. But he's the best damned cowman that ever made an outfit pay. He won't ask his men to work no harder than he does. He's the first man saddled of a cold wet mornin' and the last one to bed down at night. He pays top wages and expects his men to be tough enough to earn their money—but he's scared of that yallerhided Hornet outlaw. I bet he was damned glad to be rid of Hornet. Because some day he'd be bound to make a ride at him. And he's scared. Say, what do you aim to do with that no-account outlawed dun thing, anyhow?"

"I'm goin' to make Grant Smith ride him some day," came the quiet answer. And something about the way Bill Riggs said it made the talkative old stage driver shut up.

That is to say old Limpy said nothing more about Grant Smith and the Hornet outlaw until he had reached town and dropped the crippled bronc rider at the doctor's house. Then he left his team at the stable, hastened with their watering and feeding which he never entrusted to the stable hands, and headed for the nearest saloon.

And as the free drinks flowed down his thirsty gullet, old Limpy told the story of the young bronc rider being crippled and buying the outlawed Hornet that had thrown him.

"He's from Texas where Grant Smith hails from. And he's packin' an old grudge," elaborated old Limpy. "Know what he told me? Guess why he bought that damned man-killin' outlaw hoss? I'll tell you boys what he told me in secret. He's goin' to hold a gun on Grant Smith some day and make that big son ride the Hornet outlaw. . . . Another whiskey, mister, and gimme a man-sized tumbler in place of this glass thimble!"

THE doctor told Bill Riggs as he put the injured right arm in new splints, "It'll always be stiff. You got it fractured in the elbow joint. Bad place."

"You mean I can't ever bend it again?"

"That's the verdict, young man. The elbow joint. . . ."

Bill Riggs looked at the splintered arm, holding it out like a stick in front of him.

"Take those splints off, then. And bend the arm at the joint. Then let 'er get stiff, if it has to. It's no good to me stuck out straight. Fix 'er like I tell you and no back talk. I think you're loco as hell, an' I know you're drunk. Start givin' up head and throwin' big words at me and I'll slap you more sober than you've bin since you was a baby."

Some time during the night Bill Riggs pulled out of town, riding his private horse and leading the line-backed dun outlaw, Hornet.

The drink-sodden doctor joined old Limpy at the saloon and added his bit to the stage driver's story.

"He made me bend his arm at the joint that was smashed," said the medico, drinking whiskey and water, "and splint it at the level of the gun on his hip. And

he made the remark that he'd have to learn to shoot left handed. Said he'd come back and pay me when he made his South America stake. Abused me all the time he was there. And me doing the best I could for him."

So when Bill Riggs rode away from Chinook, Montana, that night, he left behind him plenty of food for the conversation that went well with the forty-rod whiskey sold at the Bucket of Blood Saloon. And he gave old Limpy some juicy war talk to carry to the town of Landusky at the other end of the stage line. It was only natural that this talk spread across the cow country like a prairie fire.

By the time the story reached the ears of Grant Smith it was colored a gory red and was as scarey as war talk can get by repeated telling.

Perhaps there was a goodly mixture of Indian blood in Grant Smith's veins that made him silent at times. His silences were black, ugly, brooding, and during them, men let him alone.

It was typical of the Hammer ramrod that he made no comment of any sort when he had been told that the crippled bronc rider was going to make him ride the Hornet outlaw. And the story went that Bill Riggs would make Grant Smith fight a gun duel if the dun outlaw didn't kill him.

But when weeks and months went by and Bill Riggs didn't return with the dun bronc, men forgot the incident. Bill Riggs seemed to have vanished from Montana. Range gossip fed on fresher things.

The winter snows shut the cowboys off in line camps away from town. Chinook was as dead as a cow town can be in the winter time, and there were days on end when the drifts were too deep, the blizzards too dangerous to permit old Limpy and his horses to make the long trip from Chinook to Landusky. Mail was carried on a pack horse by a man old Limpy hired for the job his rheumatic old bones could not stand, while Limpy and the whiskey-soaked doctor played pitch and coon-can with the bartender at the Bucket of Blood Saloon.

Chinook waited patiently for the coming of that warm wind in early spring —the Chinook wind from which the little cow town took its name. Bill Riggs and the Hornet outlaw were almost forgotten.

But out at the home ranch of the Hammer outfit Grant Smith had not forgotten. He remembered only too well the yellow, line-backed outlaw horse and the young bronc rider who had bought the animal. When he rode alone, his opaque black eyes were always restless, watching the snow for tracks, scanning the white hills for riders, scrutinizing every patch of scrub pine for concealed men. He packed a saddle gun when he rode, and never took off his gun belt and six-shooter except when he went to bed.

Grant Smith had always pulled the shades before he ever lighted a lantern in his cabin. And when in town he walked carefully and never stood at a bar with his back toward the door. But then, he had those habits long before Bill Riggs had shown up last Fall at the Hammer ranch to sign on for the bronc-peeler's job.

In Chinook, where Grant Smith had hired him, the young cowpuncher had given his name as Bill Riggs. Grant Smith had never seen him before, to his knowledge. But drunk as he was in town the night he hired Bill Riggs, there was something vaguely familiar about the young bronc rider that bothered him. Something that reminded him of a thing that had happened down on the Mexican Border more than a dozen years before, long before the big Apache-looking cowhand had been known as Grant Smith and before he had hit the trail for Montana where they did not know him.

The memory of that happening along the Border was something that Grant Smith had been trying, if not to forget, at least to put behind him as something that is buried and lost. And now, especially during the long snowbound winter nights, Grant Smith's brain was tortured by haunting ghosts. And somehow his subconscious mind kept linking this Bill Riggs with that ugly thing he was trying to run away and hide from.

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsmoke Ghost

BILL RIGGS had grit. Grit and patience and a way of thinking that belongs more to the Indian than to a white man. There were a lot of Indian traits in his make-up.

Most men would have stayed in town until that broken arm had mended. But Bill Riggs had ridden away during the night, leading the Hornet outlaw. He had headed for the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation.

Every mile of that long ride to the Indian camps on Peoples Creek was torture. For his big bay private horse, Sundance, was built for covering distances, not for his even gait. He was rough-gaited, but as tough a road horse as ever a man forked. Every little jolting sent throbbing pains through the young bronc rider's broken arm. Hornet had given him the hardest ride of his life.

He was gray with fatigue and pain when he reached the Assiniboine camp on Peoples Creek in the first light of dawn. And in spite of his splinted arm, he managed enough sign talk with his hands to make himself understood.

The Indians took care of him and his horses. And during the weeks Bill Riggs spent at the Assiniboine camp no news of his stay ever reached a white man's ears. Which was just what Bill Riggs had wanted it, and all according to his way of planning. When he went with an old Assiniboine, called Eyes-in-the-Water, to camp on the head of Big Warm in the Little Rockies, no white man knew it, and the Indians who knew of his camp were not in the habit of talking.

The tepid, muddy waters of Big Warm spring were not exactly medicinal, but here Bill Riggs soaked his injured arm. He combined his own knowledge with the instructions of old Eyes-in-the-Water, who was a medicine man. In two months the injured arm which the drunken doctor at Chinook had told Bill would always be stiff, was almost as good as ever.

And the Hornet outlaw was as gentle as the Sundance bay.

Bill Riggs with his untiring patience, his horse savvy, his easy way with a green bronc, was roping off Hornet and riding him bareback around camp. Hornet was as gentle as any cow horse, and was camp broke, so that the man never used hobbles or a picket rope on him any more. He turned the two horses loose at night. They'd be somewhere near camp in the morning. He made biscuit eaters of them both—camp pets.

But let any man other than Bill Riggs try to handle either horse and he had an outlaw at the end of his rope. Hornet threw every Indian who claimed to be a rider. He was strictly a one-man horse.

"Hornet, you biscuit guzzlin' rascal!" grinned Bill Riggs as he taught the line-backed dun such tricks as lying down and playing dead or shaking hands or kneeling for a man to mount, "I'd bet that there ain't a man between Canada and Mexico can ride you without hobblin' his stirrups and chokin' the horn and usin' ten pounds of stickum glue on the seat of his britches. And remember, feller, why I'm teachin' you to bite, strike and kick a stranger. There's some scars on your hide that was put there by the first man that ever tried to break you. When

you showed him you didn't like his ways, he must of worked you with a bull whip that had strands of barb wire braided in its tip. And he whupped you over the head some. You fought that big son till you was played out, then he turned you loose all crippled up. He didn't think anybody sighted him fightin' a two year old green colt he'd stole from old Eyes-in-the-Water and run off onto the Hammer range. He turned you loose too crippled up to travel back to your home range. You just leave the tricks to me and we'll pay that big son off with interest. You'll get your chance at the man that calls hisself Grant Smith. It'll take the kind of patience old Eyes-in-the-Water has. You can learn a lot of things by studyin' his ways. Things like patience and how to pay off a bad debt."

During those days Bill Riggs talked to the Hornet outlaw as he might have talked to a human being. And a white man wouldn't have understood a lot of it, even though he talked white man's language. Because Bill Riggs was talking like old Eyes-in-the-Water might have talked in Assiniboine.

THE line camp known as the old Frenchman's Place lay at the edge of the badlands at the boundary of the Hammer range. When Grant Smith had bought the Hammer outfit he had tried to buy out the old Canuck squaw-man, Ed Dufresne, who owned it. But old Dufresne, better known as Frenchy, had refused to sell. He lived there with his Cree squaw and made a living from the homestead he had taken up with his soldier's rights and pension when he had quit the army years ago. Frenchy Dufresne had been a scout and a good one, with such Indian fighters as Crook, Custer and Miles.

"She's my home, by gar!" he had told Grant Smith ten years ago, when the big newcomer who had bought the Hammer outfit had approached him about buying the place he needed for a winter line camp.

"She's de h'only home me h'an de h'ol 'oman got for to die from de h'ol' age bimeby. De h'ol 'oman, he's lak dis place. H'i'm not sell for no price to no man. She's de home, onderstan'!"

Frenchy Dufresne hadn't sold. Grant Smith had tried other, harsher ways, to induce the old squaw-man to sell. He'd tried running off old Frenchy's horses, killing his cattle, even burning part of his free range. But old Frenchy had held on. That was when money and whiskey had failed to move the old squaw-man's stubborn determination to keep his ranch.

Whiskey was old Frenchy's weakness. He was in great demand at all the breed dances because he was the best fiddler in that part of the cow country. And it was when he was on his way home from one of these dances on a cold winter's night that evil luck had overtaken him.

His squaw was away on one of her visits to her people in Canada. Frenchy had gone to Landusky to play for a big Thanksgiving dance. He had stayed over the next day in town to finish up his jag, and had pulled out in late afternoon on horseback with his fiddle in its case, tied behind his saddle cantle and a jug of whiskey that hung by a buckskin thong from his saddle horn.

Because his place was a thirty mile journey he had planned to stop on the way at a breed camp on Rock Creek. But Frenchy Dufresne had never reached the breed camp or his own place at the edge of the badlands.

It stormed that night, snowed heavily, and two days later his horse showed up at Landusky. The fiddle in its case was still tied to the saddle. It was more than a week before they found old Frenchy's frozen body buried in the snowdrifts between town and the breed camp, not fifteen miles from Landusky.

The half-emptied jug beside the frozen body seemed to tell the story. Frenchy had gotten off to take a drink or to walk a ways. It must have been dark. His horse had quit him. The knotted bridle reins had been looped over the saddle horn when the horse came into town. Frenchy, drunk, and hitting the jug, had sat down to rest. He'd fallen into that drowsy slumber that precedes freezing. Had frozen to death.

They buried Frenchy Dufresne at Landusky. The Cree squaw showed up for the funeral. And before they had dropped the last frozen clods of earth in on top of the pine box that held old Frenchy's body, Grant Smith had showed the widowed Cree woman a thick roll of money and had told her he'd take the place off her hands.

The old squaw, fat, wrinkled, dry eyed, had spat in his face and called him a murderer. She'd cursed him in English and Cree. Leaving him standing there, the object of the stares of the big crowd of whites, breeds and Indians who had attended the burial, the squaw had climbed up on the seat of her X wagon. With her blanket covering her head and shoulders and face, she had driven away, headed for the ranch.

Some of the squaw's people had come to live with her. That next spring she and her relatives took Frenchy's body from its grave at the Landusky cemetery and buried it at his ranch, within an easy stone's toss of the old log cabin.

Not a week later some Hammer cowboys reported that they'd stopped at the Frenchman's Place and found it deserted. Not a soul was living there. Most of the furniture, including the kitchen range and the beds and other bigger stuff had been carted away. The place was forlorn and desolate.

And beside the grave of Frenchy Dufresne was a new grave.

THE sheriff and some of Landusky's citizens dug up the new grave. In a big pine board box they found the body of Frenchy's squaw. She had been dressed for burial in her best clothes and blanket. Examination of the dead body showed that she had been shot.

Every Indian, breed and white man in that vicinity was questioned. The Cree relatives of the dead squaw had disappeared as if by magic. And when months passed and the mystery of the squaw's death remained unsolved, the thing became no more than another spooky story to tell around the campfire.

In due time, by process of the law and sheriff's sale, Grant Smith acquired the Frenchman's place, with its livestock, log cabins and barn and sheds, its pole corrals and irrigated hay meadows and grazing land. And, he owned the two graves not a hundred feet from the old log cabin.

Grant Smith had finally gained ownership of the best line camp location on his range. He'd gotten it for almost nothing, but he was to wish he'd never set eyes on the place.

The Frenchman's place, even before the first winter Grant Smith took possession of it, had gained the evil reputation of being haunted. No breed or Indian would go near the place. Even white men avoided stopping there.

Grant Smith put two of his toughest men there for the winter. They had been there only a week when a man brought word to him that he'd stopped at the Frenchman's place to find a dead man lying on the floor of the cabin in a smear of dried blood. The other line camp cowpuncher was missing. Sign showed there'd been a gun fight. One of the two had shot the other to death and then pulled out for another range.

That had been the first of a number of shooting scrapes and queer happenings at the Frenchman's place. And now Grant Smith could not get a man to stay there

alone, or with any other man for camp partner. Beside the two graves of Frenchy Dufresne and his squaw, the graves of three more men were dug.

All sorts of stories were told concerning the Frenchman's place. Men remembered that the squaw had accused Grant Smith of Frenchy Dufresne's murder, though no mark of violence had been found on the frozen body. Then someone had ventured a question to which nobody could give a reasonable answer.

Two days had elapsed between the winter afternoon when Frenchy had left Landusky until his body had been found buried in the deep snow along the road not ten miles from town. Where had his horse been during that time?

That was one question to which nobody had ever found an answer. Then there was another question: Why had the squaw accused Grant Smith of murder and refused to explain her accusation. Who had killed the squaw? And why?

Some said that the squaw had put a curse on the place and killed herself. Others claimed that the Indians had used it as a burial ground centuries ago and held the place sort of sacred. They visited it only when they went at night to tie bits of cloth to the bushes—ghost flags. Breeds and many whites said the place was haunted.

And with its empty cabin and barn and sheds, its corral gates yawning open, it was a ghostly place, day or night. The creak of a rusty hinge on a sagging door broke the hush that hung over the place like an invisible pall.

Grant Smith cursed his men for cowardly, spooky fools because none of them would go to the Frenchman's place and winter there. But not since he had gotten the place at sheriff's sale had Grant Smith spent a single night there. And there were times when not stopping at the Frenchman's place had meant a long, cold ride to another camp.

No man came right out and asked Grant Smith why he didn't stay at the Frenchman's place. Since the squaw had accused him of Frenchy's murder and the sheriff had asked the big cowman a lot of questions, the finger of suspicion had been pointed at Grant Smith. Yet there had been no real proof to connect the big cowman with Frenchy's death. Any sort of joshing or hoorawing regarding the Frenchman's place was out of order with the owner of the Hammer outfit.

Cowboys, passing the old cabin at night, reported having seen flickering lights in the windows. Others swore they'd heard the sound of Frenchy's fiddle. On one or two occasions travelers had heard shots, though saner minded men said that the sounds were not shots but the frost cracking the ice in the creek. The only living prowlers about the deserted place were coyotes and wolves and a half tame black bear which had belonged to old Frenchy.

The ghosts of Frenchy and his murdered squaw, and the ghosts of the three men who had been killed there at different times were said to be roaming about the old log ranch. But ghosts don't leave tracks. Ghosts don't ride horses that eat hay. A ghost doesn't butcher a Hammer yearling and help himself to the grub cache in the root cellar. A ghost doesn't pack a six-shooter. And a ghost doesn't teach tricks to a line-backed, dun-colored horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood of His Fathers

ON the big, heavy doors of the long log barn at the Hammer home ranch were carved with jacknife blades and pencils all manner of brands, earmarks and names. There were crude sketches in pencil, recorded there by idling cow-

boys hanging around the big barn augering and whittling.

No telling how long that name, Pete Blue, had been there, carved sharply and clearly into the pine wood of one of the half-doors of the barn. It might have been there a week or a month or even longer before Grant Smith sighted it. And when he saw it, the blood seemed suddenly to drain from his deeply tanned face, as if he were staring at a ghost.

He looked around furtively, but none of the several cowpunchers going in and out of the barn at the time seemed to be paying him any notice. Grant Smith quit the barn and went to his log house. He got out a jug and tin cup and took several big drinks of raw whiskey, one on top of the other. Some of the color came back into his face and his heavy grip on the tin cup became steadier.

That day Grant Smith did not ride with his men. He stayed in his log house and spent the hours drinking heavily and poring over his account books and papers he took from a battered safe. And at every little sound he would stiffen, his hand on his gun.

His door was barred on the inside and the shades pulled. Grant Smith was acting like a man whose nerve had suddenly cracked. Even the quart or more of whiskey he consumed could not make him drunk enough to throw off that fear that was driving him like a lash. Grant Smith was scared. Scared as hell.

That night he ate little supper. And after a hurried meal, he went back to his house. He locked himself in and made certain that the windows were blanketed before he lit his lamp. With the wick turned low and a sawed-off shotgun beside his bed, he lay down without even removing his boots.

His six-shooter was in his hand. Now and then he dropped into a drunken sleep that was filled with nightmare dreams that bathed his big body in a cold sweat.

At daybreak he drank a lot of strong black coffee while he waited for the horse wrangler to fetch in the remuda from the horse pasture. He caught up his top horse, told his straw-boss to run the layout till he got back, and hit the trail for Landusky.

He spent a week in town, drinking, always on guard. And when his attorney arrived, hastily summoned from Chinook, the two were hours in close conference at the cabin Grant Smith kept in town.

The attorney spent the night in Landusky, taking the stage back in the morning. He had spent the night drinking with Grant Smith and had a bad hangover as he rode up on the seat with old Limpy. He wasn't accustomed to so much hard drinking but he had been afraid of offending the surly tempered, ugly tongued cowman by refusing to join him.

"How long has Grant Smith been on his big spree, Limpy?" the lawyer asked.

"Just started. Never knowed him to act the way he was doin' last night, eyein' everybody like he expected 'em to shoot him in the back—especially Injuns and breeds. He acted like he'd gone a little loco. Like as if he'd spent the night before at the Frenchman's place." Old Limpy chuckled.

"The Frenchman's place, eh?" The Chinook lawyer took a pull at his flask and offered the bottle to Limpy who grabbed it as a drowning man grabs the proverbial straw.

"There's a story goin' around," said Limpy, "that old Frenchy and his squaw is raisin' hell again at the ranch where they're buried. I mind how after the squaw had taken Frenchy's carcass from the Landusky plantin' ground to bury it at the ranch, for three days and nights her and them other Injuns set up a death wailin' that never stopped. For three days and nights. I slipped down there with some of the boys from town. We was all

a leetle tipsy. But I'll tell a man I was sober when I come away. I kin still feel the shivers a-cavortin' up and down my spine when I remember the sound of that wailin'. Made a man's hair stand on end. . . ."

LIMPY took another drink from the flask. "And here's somethin' again," he continued. "The night before they found the Frenchman's place deserted and the squaw buried there, I rid past the place. There was a dim light showin' in the cabin. And I'll go to hell for a sheep killin' dawg if I didn't hear that same death wailin'! There ain't enough gold in the Little Rockies to git me to spend a night alone at the Frenchman's place. No wonder Grant Smith would like to git rid of it. I don't blame him for puttin' the Frenchman's place up for sale like he did a few months ago. But hell, nobody will buy it."

"You're wrong, Limpy. The Frenchman's place was sold day before yesterday, not an hour before I got a message from Grant Smith to meet him in Landusky. The Land Office sold it to a man named Pete Blue."

"Who's Pete Blue? Never heard of him." Limpy spat a stream of tobacco juice past the rump of the off wheeler.

The attorney took a quick drink as if he needed it. He felt gingerly of his throat. Limpy had noticed the lawyer's neck was a little bruised and discolored.

"The name had a damned odd effect upon Grant Smith when I told him the Frenchman's place had been bought by a man named Pete Blue. He nearly jumped out of his hide. He almost choked me to death. Then he went to pieces, like a man gone suddenly insane. Called me all the liars and double-crossing coyotes and so on that he could lay tongue to. And fired me as his attorney. If the sheriff had been in town I'd have had him put in jail, Limpy. Grant Smith is, without a doubt, dangerously insane."

"He acted loco, shore enough," agreed Limpy.

"I recall what he said when he had me choked black in the face and I thought my last moment on earth had come. I heard him growling like a mad dog as he threw me in a corner of his cabin.

" 'Pete Blue is dead, you blackmailing shyster!' I heard him shout. And he slammed the door. Left me for dead there in the cabin. I had a narrow squeak, Limpy."

"You did, fer a fact," agreed old Limpy, storing in his mind this juicy bit of gossip that would get him plenty of free drinks at the Bucket of Blood.

"What do you suppose he meant by saying this Pete Blue was dead and that I was a damned blackmailer?" said the lawyer, taking a drink to steady his jagged nerves.

"Pete Blue," muttered Limpy, reaching for the flask. "Never heard the name. Sounds kinda Injun to me. Ever take time to notice how Grant Smith hates Injuns and breeds? He won't hire a man that's got any Injun blood in him. And he won't even feed the old blanket Injuns driftin' acrost his range. He'll fire any line camp cowpuncher that feeds a breed or Injun. And to look at Grant Smith a man 'ud swear he had some Injun blood in him. He's got Apache eyes, or I'm a sheep stealin' houn'!"

"I've always suspected Grant Smith of being a breed. And now I'd almost swear to it. The look on his face when I mentioned the name Pete Blue was that of a painted savage. Ugh." The attorney shuddered.

"Take a drink. I got a jug in the boot if we kill that baby size bottle. You need a good drink. You're Grant Smith's attorney—"

"I *was*," amended the lawyer, loosening his starched shirt collar.

"Then you handled the land deal. You

must have seen this Pete Blue feller when he signed the papers."

"The deal was made at the Land Office."

"Cash money?"

"Spot cash. The price was dirt cheap. Grant Smith was ready to get rid of that jinx place at any price. It's no good to anyone. Not even the tough Hammer cowpunchers would stay there. Nobody but a stranger would buy that place at any price."

"A stranger," nodded Limpy gravely. "Or a dead man."

"A dead man?"

"Grant Smith told you that the Pete Blue gent was a dead man, didn't he? So what the hell? That ain't no queerer than a lot of the other yarns concernin' the Frenchman's place."

A dead man buying the Frenchman's place! What a tale to peddle for free drinks to the barflies at the Bucket of Blood!

HAD he wished to, Bill Riggs could have gone to Fred Roberts, the big deputy sheriff at Landusky, and proved to the satisfaction of the law that Grant Smith had murdered Frenchy Dufresne. Bill Riggs knew that Grant Smith had followed Frenchy out of town that winter afternoon. Frenchy had stopped when Grant Smith caught up with him in the dusk, when the storm was just starting. There had been an argument and Grant Smith had hit the drunken old Frenchy over the head with his six-shooter barrel. The blow had killed the old man. Grant Smith had carried the dead body off the main trail and left it there with the half emptied jug. To the searching party who found the body frozen and buried in the drifts, it was simply a case of Frenchy freezing to death.

But Grant Smith had not wanted the body found right away. So he had hid Frenchy's horse for a couple of nights at a deserted trapper's camp. Then he had led the saddled horse to the edge of town during the night and turned it loose.

Two breed boys had seen the murder, had watched Grant Smith dispose of the body with the aid of the blizzard. Afraid to go to the law, they had taken their story to the widowed squaw.

Those breed boys had told their story to Bill Riggs and Eyes-in-the-Water. The Indians and breeds knew the truth about the death of Frenchy Dufresne. Bill Riggs told them to keep the secret and likewise to keep the secret of the squaw's suicide.

In her own stoical Cree way the squaw had loved old Frenchy. They had lived the best years of their lives together. With her husband dead, there was nothing left on this earth for the squaw. With her own hands she dug the two graves. She had her people help her bring Frenchy's body to the new grave.

The squaw gave to her relatives everything that had belonged to Frenchy and to her. She made her own coffin, and for three days and nights she had sat in the cabin and sung her death chant with her women relatives. And then had taken her own life.

At secret councils of different tribes, the Assiniboine, Gros Ventres, Blackfoot, Flathead, Sarcee, Cree, the name of Grant Smith was marked for death.

Grant Smith already had the death sign placed upon him when Bill Riggs, his broken arm in a splint, rode to the lodge of Eyes-in-the-Water. And one night Bill Riggs, in sign language and through an interpreter, told the old men assembled at the lodge of Eyes-in-the-Water a story.

It was the story of a half-breed Apache who had betrayed his people. It was an ugly story of a bad half-breed whose father was an outlawed Texan, who had been driven out of Texas by the Rangers

and had joined a band of renegade Apaches in Mexico. This Texan had taken his pick of the Apache girls. There had been no legal marriage, no tribal ceremony, no formality of any sort when the outlawed Texan who had given himself the easy name of Smith, carried off the young Apache girl. When a baby boy was born, the man named the child Grant Smith. Perhaps his own name had been Grant before he'd been run out of Texas.

The father could not be bothered with a squaw and small baby. He deserted them somewhere in that lawless strip of country bordering on Indian Territory known as No Man's Land. The Apache girl and her baby found a home with the Cherokees. Soon after, the Rangers killed the outlaw Smith.

The Apache mother died when Grant Smith was a small boy, and he was adopted and raised by a Cherokee named Pete Blue. Pete Blue was a young chief who owned many horses, plenty of land, and a big bunch of cattle. He had no sons of his own. His three children, to his bitter disappointment, were girls. Pete Blue was proud of his adopted son, whom he called Grant Blue. Handsome, reckless and domineering, Grant was big for his age, the best rider and cowpuncher in the Cherokee Strip.

But Grant Blue despised all Indians. He knew that his real father had been a white man. And when he was about sixteen he stole a bunch of his foster-father's horses and went to Texas. He was a grown man in size and a top-hand. Denying even to himself that he had Indian blood in his veins, he lost no opportunity to show openly his hatred and contempt for Indians or breeds. Grant Blue became Grant Smith in Texas and trailed with a hard-riding, quick-triggered bunch of rustlers along the Pecos.

Then the Rangers broke their gang up, killing most of them. That part of the country became too hot for Grant Smith. Wounded, with the law close behind him, Grant Smith took refuge in the Cherokee Strip. Half dead from his wounds, from hunger and exposure and lack of medical attention, the young half-breed had gone back to Pete Blue.

Against his own better judgment and the advice of his Cherokee friends, Pete Blue took back his foster son. The stalwart, hard-riding, treacherous young half-breed again took the name of Grant Blue.

Grant Smith, alias Grant Blue, half-breed Apache, bided his time. Old Pete Blue did not believe in white men's banks. He buried his money in a secret place. And because he was a shrewd trader, there was a tidy fortune buried.

One night the half-breed known as Grant Blue disappeared. With him went two of Pete Blue's best horses, and all of the old Cherokee chief's buried money. The following day Pete Blue's murdered body was found hidden in some brush.

THAT was the story Bill Riggs told Eyes-in-the-Water and the other old men as the long stemmed pipe passed around the circle and the name of Grant Smith was marked for death.

"Tell them," Bill Riggs spoke through the interpreter, who was the son of Eyes-in-the-Water, "that if they kill Grant Smith, the white man's law would not understand. Tell them that I have been on Grant Smith's trail for ten years. I gave my promise to the Cherokees to avenge the murder of their chief, Pete Blue. I am here to keep that promise. If I fail, I pass the promise on to Eyes-in-the-Water."

And after the long stemmed pipe of the Assiniboines had passed around the circle Eyes-in-the-Water spoke.

"Tell the white man he has talked well. He has talked with signs that let us know he is our friend, even as Frenchy Dufresne was our friend who never lied to us. Dufresne was a white man. His

Cree name was Dull Knife. Ask this white man if he has a name among the Cherokees."

And when the son of Eyes-in-the-Water had interpreted the old man's talk, Bill Riggs again stood up and spoke.

"I have a name among the Cherokees, tell Eyes-in-the-Water and these other old men. I am a white man, but I was born in the Cherokee Strip and raised with the Cherokees. My father was their friend. He wore this badge."

Bill Riggs unbuttoned his shirt. Pinned to his undershirt was a Texas Ranger's badge. He unpinned it and handed it to Eyes-in-the-Water.

"I was a small boy when Grant Smith burned my father's ranch on the border of Texas and Indian Territory. He killed my mother. I was saved by the Cherokees. My father left me with them and took Grant Smith's trail. Grant Smith killed him. The Cherokees raised me. I learned their ways. My heart was Indian. Ten years ago when Pete Blue was murdered they told me the whole story of Grant Smith and gave me my father's badge. I swore to take the trail of Grant Smith and kill him. I promised that to them. They pinned my father's badge on me. And they gave me the name of Pete Blue, and sent me out on the trail. Tell that to Eyes-in-the-Water and the other old men. I have finished."

CHAPTER FOUR

Four-Footed Murder!

GRANT SMITH was scared. He was so scared inside that no amount of whiskey could shake off that creeping feeling of dread which was on him, like a clammy hand at the back of his neck. The name of Pete Blue had been as terrifying as a real ghost. A wild panic took hold of the big half-breed.

He cursed his own stupidity even because he sunk the money for which he had killed old Pete Blue, into the Hammer outfit. Someone had found him out. They were using the name of Pete Blue to blackmail him. That was it!

It wasn't the law that had found him out, he was sure. The law would arrest him. It was some crook trying to scare him into running. If that was the case, then there was no need to act like a loco sheepherder scared of spooks. Grant Smith had met thieves and killers before and hadn't lost to them yet. He kept telling himself that as he sat in his log cabin in Landusky, drinking whiskey and jerking his gun at every little sound.

It was dark when a rapping at his door brought him out of his chair, his six-shooter in his hand.

He blew out the light and crossed to the door. A look through the peephole cleverly devised showed only a small breed boy who ran errands around town. Grant Smith opened the door cautiously. The small boy standing in the moonlight shoved a square envelope into his hand and ran. The big man swore under his breath, shut the door and barred it. He read the penciled note written on a piece of brown wrapping paper:

> Unless you would rather hang for the murder of Ed Dufresne, meet me alone to-night at midnight at the Frenchman's place.
>
> Pete Blue.

Grant Smith's big hands shook after he read the penciled message. He took several big drinks of raw whiskey and then he burned the note. He examined his six-shooter and carbine with minute care. Taking a full quart of whiskey with him, he left the cabin.

He got his horse and rode out of Landusky at a long trot, taking the trail that led to the Frenchman's place.

Ghosts of dead men can't write notes, he told himself, and took some courage

from the thought. It was a live man he was facing.

By God, Grant Smith was as tough as any one man that ever packed a gun. He'd kill the sneaking, blackmailing son that called himself Pete Blue and bury his carcass alongside the rotting bones of old Frenchy.

The quart was half gone by the time he topped the ridge that looked down on the Frenchman's place. There was only part of a moon, and the buildings and corrals were shadowy blots. It was early spring, and there were still patches of snow in the gullies and around the clumps of willow and buck-brush. The tall cottonwoods were skeleton limbed, and snow blanketed the graves of Frenchy and his squaw, there near the main cabin. Somebody had put a whitewashed picket enclosure around the twin graves.

Grant Smith took a long pull at his bottle. Then the neck of the bottle rattled against his teeth because, from the cabin there came the squeak of a fiddle.

It was too indistinct to make out the tune, though the night was deathly still. The fiddle music stopped with a dismal, rosined, off-key note that was like a thin death wail. Then a silence. Grant Smith took another drink, and cursed himself for a fool. That son of a snake down there was trying to scare him; trying to get his nerves on edge.

Then, as Grant Smith corked his bottle, he saw the flare of a match in the cabin doorway. And by its brief yellow light he made out a man holding the cupped flame to light the cigarette. The man was too far for a six-shooter and before Grant Smith could get his saddle gun from its scabbard the light was gone.

Dismounting, his six-shooter in his hand, Smith led his horse down the slope, taking a course that was screened by brush. When he had reached a spot about a hundred yards from the cabin, he left his horse and taking his saddle gun, crept on, taking advantage of every patch of brush or clump of boulders to screen his stealthy approach.

HE had covered some distance when he heard the popping of brush and clatter of shod hoofs behind him from the spot where he had left his horse. He whirled, crouching, his gun cocked. And he went stiff with dismay and anger as he saw his saddled horse stampeding back along the trail, stirrups flopping, snorting with fear. Something had frightened the animal.

A chill crept up Grant Smith's spine and the hands that gripped his carbine shook a little. Then he saw what had frightened his horse.

A black bear ambled with clumsy gait from the brush in the wake of the horse that topped the ridge and was gone from sight. Even a gentle horse is afraid of a bear. Frenchy had owned a pet black bear that still hung around the place, half wild. It loped out of sight. Grant Smith turned his attention to the cabin. Crouching there, he cursed the luck that had set him afoot.

But the man there at the cabin would have a saddled horse somewhere. A horse, Grant Smith reflected, that the son of a snake wouldn't be needing after he, Grant Smith, had done with him. One horse would be enough for him and the man he was going to kill. He could hear the creak of saddle leather now as the horse moved around inside the closed corral.

Then Grant Smith jumped a little. From inside the darkened cabin came the scraping of rosined bow across fiddle strings. Somebody inside the cabin was tuning a fiddle. Even as tipsy old Frenchy had sat in there, night after night with his squaw, and tuned his old fiddle and played the *Red River Jig*.

Grant Smith cursed thickly and needed a drink, but he'd left his bottle in his saddle pocket. And then he had that

sudden panic of a heavy drinker suddenly cut off from his supply of whiskey. Immediately his need for a stiff drink increased a thousandfold. Better get down there and do his shooting before the whiskey in him died out and left him palsied! So Grant Smith, carbine in his left hand, six-shooter ready in his right, crept towards the cabin.

If the man inside was tuning a fiddle, he'd be using both hands. That would give the bushwhacker first shot. Grant Smith hurried as fast as he could without making too much noise. And in a minute or two, breathing hard, he was within six-shooter range of the cabin.

He laid his carbine on the ground and thumbed back the hammer of his six-shooter. The palms of his hands were wet, and his right hand almost slipped on the smooth, walnut butt of his Colt.

Then, clearly outlined in the dark doorway, loomed the shadowy blot of a man pulling the bow across the discordant fiddle strings. It was a plain target. Grant Smith's six-shooter roared.

With a loud cry the man in the doorway pitched backward and fell. The fiddle flew from his hands and outside, breaking on the hard moonlit ground. Half in, half out of the doorway that blotted shape threshed in the uncertain light. The cries of a man in mortal agony filled the night. Grant Smith emptied his six-shooter at the threshing, moaning figure on the cabin floor just inside the doorway as a wild shot or two came from the cabin. Grant Smith, his black-whiskered, swarthy face twisted now in hate and triumph, picked up his carbine. With slow, deliberate aim, he pulled the trigger again and again, until the threshing blot was still. Then he reloaded his six-shooter and shoved fresh cartridges into the magazine of his saddle gun.

Caution prompted him not to cross that moonlit strip to make certain his victim was dead. The man might, by some miracle, have enough life left in his bullet riddled body to fire one last shot as Grant Smith bent over him to identify him. Men, too sure of their victims, had been killed that way. The thing to do was to return in broad daylight and make certain of his dead man. The thing to do now was to get that horse in the corral and get to hell away from this place. He needed a drink.

Grant Smith kept to the brush, almost running as he made for the small bronc corral. He pulled the heavy gate open and let it swing ajar behind him. In the heavy shadow thrown across the corral by the big log barn, he made out a saddled horse moving around, trailing a hackamore rope. He was in a hurry to get out of here, away from the damned place.

He grabbed the hackamore rope and swung into the saddle. As he got his right stirrup the horse jumped. Then it sank its head, whirling, bawling, pitching. And as Grant Smith grabbed the saddle horn he suddenly recognized this horse.

That bawling, almost human squall was a bold challenge, not a squeal of fear. Grant Smith knew that he was on top of the Hornet outlaw. The Hornet outlaw! Bill Riggs had come back!

IN AN instantaneous flash of memory, Grant Smith recalled that there had been a Ranger Riggs in Texas whom he had shot in the back. In those split seconds Grant Smith's brain covered the black years of his life. And he knew why he was making this death ride on the Hornet outlaw. Grant Smith knew.

He gripped the horn with both hands and with all his bull-like strength, hung on, as the heavy gate swung shut of its own weight and was caught and held shut by a wooden chock fastened to the post.

Grant Smith had no time to think, no time to really make the good ride he could

have made under ordinary circumstances. He had somehow locked his spur in the flank cinch as his right foot had been jarred from the stirrup. Now his right leg was caught and held fast at an awkward angle that threw him forward against the saddle horn and held him there. And each terrific jolt of the twisting, pitching, bawling bronc was pounding the saddle horn into him, cracking and snapping his ribs like matches, tearing and pounding his belly muscles. But he hung with both hands to the horn, his body flopping crazily, his head popping in a sickening fashion, and blood gushing from his mouth and nose.

In those seconds, those brief, swift minutes before his spur came loose of the flank cinch, before the blessing of unconsciousness came, Grant Smith must have suffered the extreme tortures of hell itself. His screams of terror shrilled above the bawling battle cry of the Hornet outlaw.

Then the man's voice ended in a broken scream. The spur came free of the flank cinch and Grant Smith's limp, flipping body pitched sideways out of the saddle and landed in a smashed, shapeless heap in the middle of the corral.

The big dun horse with black mane and tail trotted around the corral, stepped on the trailing horsehair hackamore rope and pulled up short. He stood there, quivering, crouched and bunched, ready to rear or jump sideways or backwards. It's breath coming in rattling, quick snorts, its hot eyes watched the motionless thing that lay in the dust in the center of the corral. And when the nostrils caught the smell of blood, the big line-backed dun began circling cautiously, head and neck sideways, trotting with tense, high steps around the corral.

In the cabin, Bill Riggs lay in a pool of blood that came from an ugly wound in his groin. He cut away his pants leg and fastened a crude tourniquet that finally checked the flow of blood. Then he set about bandaging the gunshot wound.

He pulled himself from the corner of the cabin to the doorway, and slowly he tore apart the clothes of the dummy that had been Grant Smith's target for all shots save the one which had caught Bill Riggs in the groin.

One by one he tossed the garments of the dummy, the shirt and coat and overalls and old hat and worn-out boots, to different parts of the littered cabin.

This done, Bill Riggs settled himself to await the coming of Eyes-in-the-Water, who would show up about sunrise as he had been told to.

He was glad that the screaming of Grant Smith had ceased, and the bawling of Hornet. He reckoned that those sounds would haunt his dreams for a long time.

It had all worked out as he had planned —all but this shot in the groin. He'd thought Grant Smith's nerves would be too jumpy to shoot straight, or that he'd be too drunk. He'd deliberately stood there with the fiddle that had been Frenchy's, and made a faint target of himself to draw Grant Smith's first shot. He'd fallen back of the wall, out of the doorway and behind the log wall, and with a rope had manipulated his dummy that lay in the doorway, making it flop. And without much effort, for the pain in his wound was bad, had moaned and cried out as if in mortal agony, while Grant Smith sent bullet after bullet into the dummy.

Bill Riggs had figured on Grant Smith not coming to the cabin. That's why he had left the Hornet outlaw saddled in the corral, and had turned loose the half-wild black bear to scare Grant Smith's horse. It had worked out as Bill Riggs had planned it. All save this bullet hole in his groin. He wiped his hands and made a cigarette.

Bill Riggs had settled with Grant

Smith, without the uncertainty of blundering courts and laws. Grant Smith had been made to pay his debts and as unconsciousness came to Bill Riggs he lay back, his cigarette smoked, a faint grin showed on his tanned face. So death found Bill Riggs.

EYES-IN-THE-WATER found him like that, and understood. Kneeling beside the dead body of the white man, he unpinned the Ranger badge and put it in his buckskin tobacco pouch. Before the moon changed he would take that badge with him on a long journey to the Cherokee country. When he had smoked the pipe of the Cherokees, he would tell them the story of Bill Riggs. And in the red streaked dawn the old Assiniboine medicine man lifted his arms to the rising sun and chanted his song to the Manitou—the death song of the Assiniboines.

When the last weird notes thinned into the stillness, Eyes-in-the-Water went to the corral. He led out the big dun-colored horse. As if performing some deep rite, the old Assiniboine unsaddled the horse and took the hackamore off the splendid black-marked head.

For a long moment the big buckskin horse stood there, in the slanting rays of the rising sun that came out of a painted dawn. The black mane was marked with drying blood. He stood with neck arched, head turning and tossing, red nostrils distended. This horse bore the brand of no man on its glistening, tawny hide. The only man the Hornet outlaw had ever let ride him was dead and somehow the horse seemed to know that.

Then the Hornet outlaw whirled and trotted away, headed for the badlands where Eyes-in-the-Water had first found him as a leggy, half-year-old colt, fighting a gaunt old wolf that had dragged down the mare and killed her.

Eyes-in-the-Water stood with his back to the corral and the blood-smeared, dust-powdered dead man in the center. The dead man's head had been crushed by a shod hoof that had left a clear imprint on the face upturned to the sky.

The old Assiniboine medicine man stood with upraised arms as the big dun horse was outlined for a moment on the ridge, like a golden statue against the rising sun and red painted sky. Then the horse seemed to vanish as if by some trick of magic. No man was ever again to see the big yellow horse called the Hornet outlaw. . . .

EVEN today, the white men have no solution for the death of Grant Smith or the death of a stranger called Bill Riggs who had given his name as Pete Blue at the Land Office at Chinook. The sheriff found the two dead men. One had been shot to death in the cabin; the other apparently kicked to death by a horse in the closed corral—that held no horse, only a bloodstained saddle.

There was Frenchy's old saddle that had disappeared when the squaw had been killed and buried and the ranch deserted. And the broken fiddle in front of the doorway. That was all—and it all added to the mystery.

The Frenchman's place, men claim, is still haunted. Winter and summer, it remains deserted, with its neglected log buildings, its corrals, its graves.

In Chinook, old Limpy, the stage driver, over his whiskey, has his own story that concerns the death of Grant Smith and the passing of the bronc rider, Bill Riggs, who bought the Hornet outlaw.

"That Bill Riggs feller told me he aimed to make Grant Smith ride the Hornet outlaw. Cowhands and pilgrims, he kept his word."

But even old Limpy cannot ever know how true he speaks.

THE END

TINHORN'S BOOTHILL

By Ed Earl Repp

To Bob Wester, faro dealer in roaring Tombstone, the click of chips and the riffle of cards was the breath of life itself. Yet, exiled from his profession and branded tinhorn, he knew that the future held only an unmourned boothill grave or the heartbreaking trail of the two-bit gambler —unless he could copper the bullet bets of the toughest gun-boss along that wild frontier!

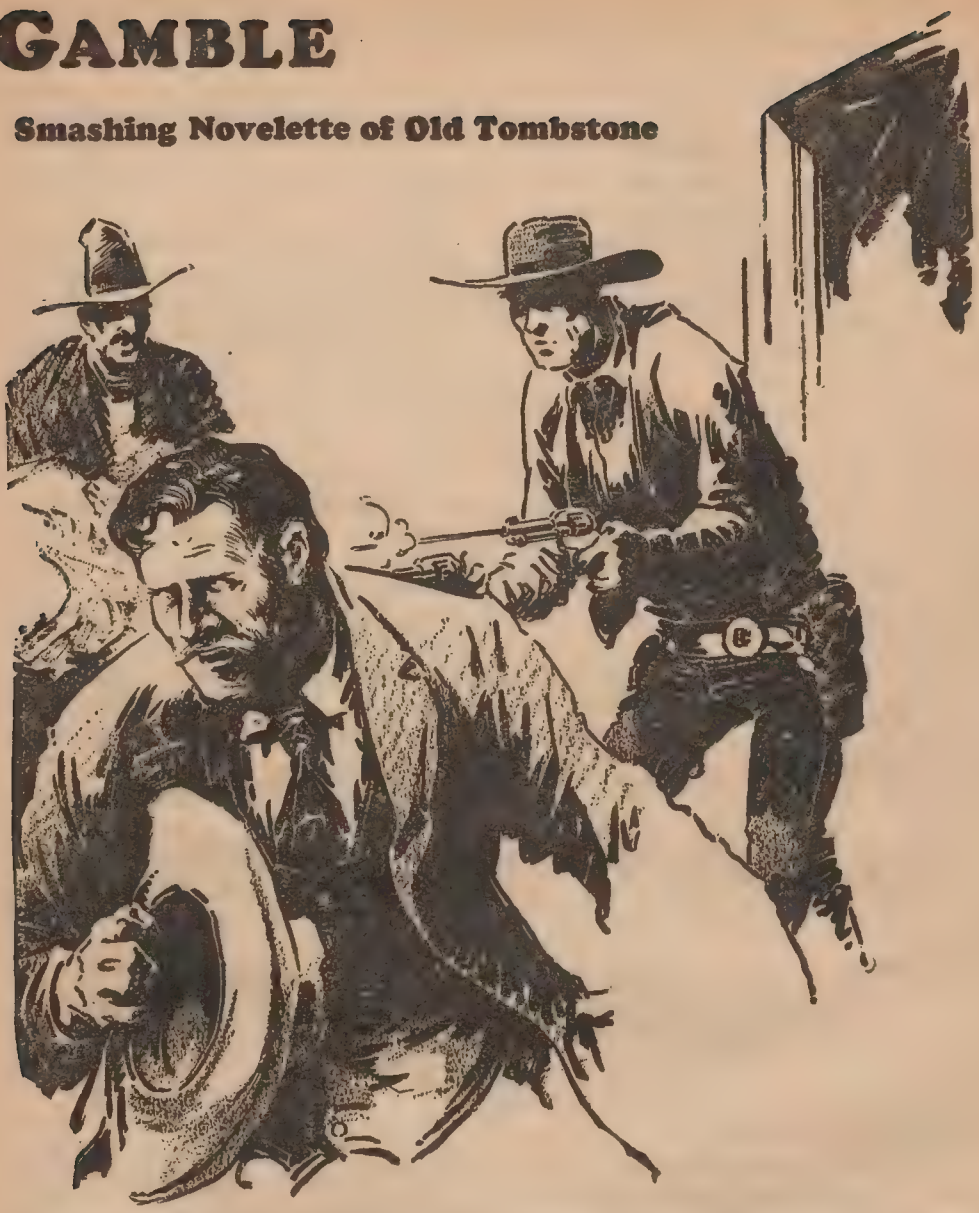
IN THE zigzag line of sweating miners who waited for the Silver Spur's paymaster-office to open, one man nudged his neighbor and said excitedly: "Look! It's the tinhorn comin' up the hill! This'll be rich!"

The information traversed the length of men. Heads turned; faces took on a gleam of excitement and expectancy. A Tombstone tinhorn coming up here to collect! The gambler must either be a brave man, or a damn fool!

The last to spin and gaze downhill was Boomer Kildea, boss powder-monkey of

GAMBLE

Smashing Novelette of Old Tombstone



the Silver Spur. He stood first in line, supporting his huge, barrel-chested body by his elbow on the sill of the paymaster's window. His straw-colored hair straggled from under his dust-caked mining cap and lay matted to his forehead. Boomer was burly and strong—a fighting man. And now, watching the slender gambler approach, an amused smile parted his lips, wrinkled freckles about his nose.

Bob Wester, as he swung up the slope, seemed oblivious to the tremor of anticipation that shook the tense men. His conventional gambler's attire failed to hide the lithe, swinging gait that tabbed him a man range-born. His broadcloth coat accentuated rather than lessened the broad sweep of his shoulders. The tan gained from countless suns of the range had not left his features, and now glowed darkly under his stovepipe beaver hat. Wester was young, in his late twenties, the full vigor of manhood in his springy step, in the sparkling, smoky gray eyes.

His lips were set tight now; his chin jutting with purpose.

The muckers of the Silver Spur closed the gaps in the line, edging nearer to catch the words. What had happened between the boss powder-monkey and the gambler last night in the Skeleton Saloon was common gossip in Tombstone this morning. Conflict between the two was inevitable.

Wester halted in front of Boomer Kildea, pushed his beaver back on his head and said, "I've come to collect on the IOU's you gimme last night before you threw your money away on the town harpies. You owe me five hundred dollars, Kildea!"

Boomer scrubbed a hairy forearm across his begrimed forehead, a sneering grin leaping to his lips. He winked at his nearest companion. A slow heat began simmering within Bob at the miner's indifference.

Kildea smirked: "Wester, yore game's as crooked as the skyline uh the Whetstones. If I paid every puncher that rid into boom towns with his bunkhouse tricks, I'd be broke all the time. Five hundred, eh? I wrote the bill in the dust last night an' the mules stomped it out. We're square! Take a tip from me, button—go back tuh chousin' steers. Herdin' pasteboards ain't yore racket."

Bob was conscious of the men closing in, of the grins of amusement and anticipation on their faces. His anger changed abruptly to a frosty bleakness. Unconsciously, he appraised the boss powder-monkey. He was big, but Bob counted odds lightly. Tiny fires glinted in his eyes.

"I didn't come for advice," he said softly. "I came for five hundred dollars. Kildea, when yuh buck the tiger at my table, you pay, and when that window opens I'll expect it! Last night you were drunk and borrowed the money to play. You lost, in a fair, square game. You're a poor loser, Kildea. If you hadn't been drunk I'd have killed you! You called me a *tinhorn*. No man can do that an' not answer to me."

Kildea's eyes lost their amused glint and flamed angrily. His massive shoulders hunched antagonistically. "Hell-on-a-winch, ain't yuh?" he snarled, fury shaking his voice. His mighty arms flexed. "If yuh wasn't freighted with hardware, Tinhorn. . . !"

At that caustic word, "Tinhorn," the color drained from Bob's face. It hadn't been the money; it had been that hateful word which had goaded and driven him up this hill to call for settlement. Boomer Kildea had called him that last night in the Skeleton Saloon, then swaggered drunkenly from the place while Bob stood stunned. Men had quit his game after that—and Bob brooded all night.

It was a word calculated to rouse the fighting blood of any man. It was the word attached to those gamblers who cheat; a name affixed to that group who deal in careless sleeve hideouts, eye-baffling tricks, and find quick graves. Luke Short, famous frontier marshal and gambler, told Bob when he had first come to Tombstone, "Don't let 'em put that handle tuh yore name. When they do, pocket yore deck an' light a shuck. You'll be through. The town won't want yuh. If yuh stay, you'll either find a gunshot grave or become a killer. The best thing to do is to pole-ax the first hombre that spits out the word." Bob had taken that advice to heart and found it sound and logical.

Now his voice cracked on the air. "I left my guns at the Skeleton, Kildea. Just what did yuh have in mind?"

A note of pure joy crept into Boomer's voice. "I'm gonna make you wish yuh never left a horse tuh hook yore spurs in a gambler's stool, Tinhorn!" he said.

WITH the speed of a lightning bolt, Bob's fist lashed out. Boomer tried to roll with the punch, but he wasn't quick enough. The gambler landed a stinging blow to his nose. The boss powder-monkey of the Silver Spur staggered against the paymaster's office.

The line of perspiring miners surged up the hill to put the combatants within a human arena. The paymaster's window went up, but no one paid heed. Few men dared brace Boomer Kildea. The crowd was more interested in how long this young gambler would last than in the month's wages awaiting them.

A guttural growl crowded from the Silver Spur giant's throat. His hairy arms pulled back, his bullet head drew down on his shoulders.

Blunt bits of advice came from the clamoring crowd: "Keep 'im shored up with one hand, Boss, while yuh tunnel 'im with the other!"

"Sift all the tin outa that tinhorn an' let 'im hang an' rattle!"

The muscles of Bob's body tautened. He swept his expensive beaver from his head, tossed it to one of the shouting, dancing miners, who promptly ran his fist through the top. That act stamped Bob deeply with a hatred for all mining men. Boomer was advancing with cold deadliness when Bob lunged at him.

Like the impact of infuriated bulls, they met, fists flailing. Bob pumped solid blows to that sweating, reddened face and felt joy as his arms numbed under the shock of his punches. His own body absorbed the sledge-like hammerings of Boomer, and corded against the shock of stunning blows. The clamor of the action-crazed miners died from his ears. He was alone—fighting for his life, for his job as dealer at the Skeleton.

The slope leading to the Silver Spur swarmed with men. They came puffing up the hill like moths drawn by a flame. The thronged streets of Tombstone looked up, listening. Word of the conflict spread like a prairie fire. Boomer Kildea and the cowboy faro dealer were having it out. Groups ran for the hill.

In the center of that growing, human circle, Bob and Boomer fought like two maddened grizzlies, straining, clinching, smashing with bleeding knuckles. With terrific effort, Bob slugged Boomer over, and in falling on top broke the miner's rib-crushing hug. Kicking, scrambling, cursing, they got to their feet, surged to battle again amid the frenzied shouting of the onlookers.

Bob's coat was gone now, ripped from his back. His trousers were torn at the knee, his bench-made boots scuffed and scarred. The left sleeve of his silk shirt waved like a banner at his elbow. The rippling muscles of his shoulder were exposed where Boomer's talons had torn the collar from his neck. Bob's right eye was puffed and bleeding from a tiny slit. A thin stream of blood trickled from his nose. But the gambler was unconscious of all this. He saw only one thing—Boomer Kildea; he heard but one word —Tinhorn!

The boss miner's heavy-featured face was an ugly mask of blood and dirt. Bob's slashing, bouncing blows had cut his lips, made a red smear of his mouth. One eye was fast closing, and an ear dripped blood where the gambler's fist had skidded by, tearing the lobe. Roars of rage gushed from his throat. His shirt was tattered and flying. His mighty torso heaved and writhed as he drove ruthlessly at the puncher-gambler.

SO intent were the combatants upon their fight, the gathering upon the drama of these two mighty men, none noticed the buckboard traversing the mean little road that wound sinuously up from Tombstone. A girl held the reins, her

curved lips drawn tight, powder-blue eyes filled with repugnance at the knowledge of what was happening within that human circle. She tooled the rig with the effortless grace of long practice. Her body swayed easily with the lurching of the seat, her corn-colored hair, whipped by the breeze, streamed out behind her shapely head.

On the seat beside her sat an elderly man, cold and austere in his manner. In his set features was an air of detached indifference as to what lay ahead. He had the bearing of a man who had looked long upon violence and held it in contempt. And he, too, rode the swaying buckboard seat with the ease of long practice. Pinned to his vest was a law badge from which the sunlight struck shafts of light.

In a pluming cloud of dust, the girl curbed the horses and leaped from the seat before the rig came to full stop. The cowman leaped to her side, his leonine head drawing down on his brawny shoulders, his hands snatching out the two holstered guns at his thighs. Roughly, the badge-toter shouldered men aside to make passage for the girl.

The miners fell away, their murmur surging through the crowd like a tidal wave. "Brad Ropin's gal an' Wyatt Earp!"

Jo Ropin followed the shouldering form of the Deputy U. S. Marshal. Silence built up behind her as she neared the center. Wyatt and Jo burst into the middle of the arena.

Jo's hands flew to her throat at the sight of the conflict. It wasn't pretty. Two tattered, battered hulks, pawing now with exhaustion, neither willing to give quarter nor ask it, spent their remaining power trying for a finishing blow. Now the young gambler was summoning the last of his strength to swing desperately. He missed, and the momentum swung him from his feet. He sprawled to the ground, began rising on elbows and knees.

Quick to take advantage of the break, Boomer let fly a booted foot. It caught Bob in the side. With a groan of anguish, the gambler halted his rise and slumped back to the dust, his hands clutching at the earth in an effort to allay the pain of cracked ribs. Boomer's foot raised again, aimed this time at Bob's head. Jo screamed.

"Kildea! Stop! Stop it!" She ran forward, her hands grasping the battle-crazed giant.

Like a ragged, moth-eaten bear poised on one foot, Boomer paused. Then his boot quivered to the ground. His face was a shambles. He hung his head as he looked at the daughter of the Silver Spur owner.

Wyatt Earp surged forward, his voice cracking crisply on the tension-charged air. "Step back, Kildea! Frolic's over. Both you an' Wester are under arrest for disturbin' the peace. The Silver Spur's bringin' charges."

"To make you understand that I mean what I say!" stormed Jo. "Boomer, when father took sick and turned the running of the mine over to me—I said no fighting. I'm not only going to cool you off in jail, but you're fired! Take them away, Marshal." She swung around, her arms akimbo, fists balled. "If you men want your pay, step up and get it! I'll close that window now if you don't move!"

The men scrambled back into line. Wyatt Earp grabbed Boomer. Then he lifted the groaning gambler to his feet, supported him on one arm, and trundled them down the slope. Jo Ropin stood there gazing after them, hearing the comments of the departing crowd.

"Serves the cowboy right!" observed someone. "He oughta stay on the range. A boom town's no place fer a puncher

that on'y knows bunkhouse poker. Big time rules goes here. If you're square you're licked afore yuh start."

"A cowprod's all right doggin' a steer, but when it comes tuh aces," remarked another, "yuh don't wanna show yore hole card till the pot's boilin' over."

The sternness went out of Jo's eyes and was replaced with a mingled expression of longing and dissatisfaction. In that carefully guarded look glowed all her restlessness and convert fear of the mines which her father owned. How could that gambler have given up the wild freedom of the open range for the life of a faro dealer? Her eyes, for a second, were bright with unshed tears, but when she turned back to her rig she was once again haughty and severe. She leaped to the seat and sent the wagon careening down the rough, rutted road.

One of the miners whistled. "Ain't she hell on wheels? Just like 'er old man. What she says goes, eh, boys?"

Someone said, "Yeah! A corn-tasseled heller, if yuh ask me. Toe the mark while she's in charge, you muckers, or she'll take yore taw, like she did Boomer Kildea's and the Tinhorn's."

"That scrap was better'n watchin' two cougars throwed down a well," enthused another. "Too bad the tinhorn slipped. That licked 'im. That goes hard, him bein' a gambler. Houses ain't hiring men that's been licked or branded with the tinhorn iron. He'll have tuh drift. . . ."

"Or kill somebody," amended another.

CHAPTER TWO

Tinhorns Not Wanted

DEPUTY MARSHAL Wyatt Earp turned both Bob Wester and Boomer Kildea over to his brother, Virgil, the marshal of Tombstone. He said, "One uh the Ropin's will be down to tell yuh when to let 'em out. These two are charged with disturbin' the peace at the Silver Spur Mine."

Doc Holiday, friend of the Earps and ace gunman, remarked drily: "If them two don't look like a passel uh clawed wildcats you kin saw the sight off my gun! Was it a cave-in—or did they go ag'in the brags uh the Clantons?"

A slow smile flitted across Virgil's face. Doc Holiday was a fighting man from who laid the track. The slim, cadaverous, ex-dentist was anyone's huckleberry in a scrap. Virgil said, "They just had a sociable augerment."

Doc shook his head. "Hate like hell tuh see 'em really get mad," he said. "Better get that gambler-fella a sawbones. He looks stove up in the middle."

Bob Wester heard it all and said nothing. His body was one terrific ache, and he was bitter from the knowledge that he had lost, had gone down to suffer the boots of Boomer Kildea. Without demur, he followed the marshal to a cell, one adjoining the boss powder-monkey of the Silver Spur. There was an occupant in his own cell, he noticed, as he stretched out on the bunk, and he regarded the silent oldster with pain-filled eyes.

Never had he seen a more morose visage than possessed by the old timer who glared belligerently back at him. The corners of the man's lips drooped; his iron-gray mustache curled down to match the lines of his mouth. His levis and plaid shirt were patched, his range boots run down at the heels. His legs were saddle-warped. Plainly he was a range bum.

Now he said, "Injuns on the war path, or did yuh fall in a rock crusher? Yuh look tuh Doleful Dobbs like a stampede tromped over yuh, wasn't satisfied an' came py-rootin' back."

Despite the pain it caused him, Bob grinned. "Not quite that bad, fella," he answered, nodding toward where Boomer

sat in the next cell, his head buried in his hands. "Him an' I had a misunderstandin' about some money—an' a certain word."

The oldster rose, shuffled along the bars and peered owlishly at Boomer. He turned, whistled. "You two musta went tuh strippin' bark offen each other like crazy beavers. Happy hell an' cold fires!" he swore doelfully. " 'Pears like I'm never there tuh get in on excitement. Son, I'm so lucky that if the Clantons an' the McLowerys an' the Earps come intuh this jail tuh shoot it out—some hombre would have gone my bail an' I'd miss it all."

"Always a little late?" murmured Bob thickly.

"Late?" echoed the oldster. "I'll tell a man! When Custer made his last stand I was in the rear guard uh reinforcements. Happy hell an' cold fires! Nothin' never happens tuh me."

"How'd you get in here, then?"

A sheepish look stole over Doleful Dobb's face. He shuffled his feet nervously and hung his head. "A hombre come into the Oriental Bar an' tromped on my toes," he murmured meekly. "So I parted his scalp permanent. Fella by the name uh Curly Bill. Ever hear uh him?"

"Fastest thing with a gun around Galeyville," grinned Bob and closed his eyes. "No—nothin' ever happens to you —yet!"

Old Doc Siles, Tombstone veterinary, bound Bob's ribs. During the process, Doleful Dobbs recalled once when ". . . a cantankerous grizzly took a swipe at me up in the Washoe country. I was just a button then. He sunk his paw clean inter my ribs, just as I shot 'im betwixt the eyes. Talk about bein' hobbled an' hurt! Say, I couldn't move that feller's weight. I had tuh hack off his paw with my Barlow an' leave it stickin' in my ribs, bein' there was no pill-busters around. I'm sproutin' ha'r there now. One uh these days I'll be furred over with a plew prime as winter beaver. Yes siree!"

The tirade was an opiate to Bob. He shook with silent laughter, which helped to ease the pain of the horse doctor's fumbling hands. In the next cell, Boomer paced the floor like a caged bear, watched the doctor work. Then he came to the bars.

"Damn shame tuh take you away from yore hawss an' mule work tuh wrap up the likes of him," he said. "If the boss' daughter hadn't shown up you'd uh been gettin' him ready fer boothill. Mebbyso you will yet."

Doleful stormed the bars, his mustache bristling. "Kill 'im, would yuh?" he screamed ragefully. "Step closer to the bars, yuh dirt-eatin' lolly-gagger, an' I'll—"

Boomer bellied to the bars, thrust his arms through and waved them impotently as Doleful discreetly stepped out of reach. He pleaded wrathfully. "Put yore skinny neck in reach an' I'll twist it off like I would a chicken's!"

"Stand back!" Virgil Earp commanded coldly and drew his gun.

Boomer blinked, drew back into his cell, glaring murder. "Fine howdy-do!" spat Dobbs. "I was just fixin' tuh tie his arms in as purty a bow knot yuh ever seen. Lawmen an' lawyers—nits an' lice! Happy hell an' cold fires!"

"You take it easy, too!" snapped the lawman. "If there's gonna be any fightin' in this jail—I'll do it!"

Doleful resumed his seat on the edge of the bunk, shuttling his eyes between the lawman and Kildea. Bob looked at him. "Thanks, partner," he mumbled, "for takin' up for me. I bet you'd of dealt him misery."

" 'Tain't nothin'," blustered Dobbs. "Some night I'll Injun up on that moose an' de-horn 'im!"

Bob smiled and Doleful grinned back. And in that exchange of glances sprang a bond of friendship that would be lasting. Dobbs thrust forth his gnarled paw. Bob shook it warmly. Gamblers, he knew, have few friends.

THE night was spent in sombre reflection, and the rest did wonders in easing the aches and pains of Bob's body. His ruggedness threw off the lesser hurts, and now only the dull pain of his ribs remained. He fought with his problem. Several times he pondered leaving Tombstone, returning to the Walking H ranch, Mal Stanton's spread, down in the San Simon Valley. There he would be welcome, and could get back his top-hand job. Mal had told him that when he left. Yet, that would be admitting defeat. He comforted himself with the knowledge that just because a man is licked is no sign he's beaten. He'd battle on. He could beat the game here. And he'd live down the sobriquet of tinhorn! He'd. . . .

And thus Bob gave himself over to reflection as the night wore on. The raucous abandon of Tombstone beat into the jail cells, making sleep difficult. Now and then the steady clamor was shattered by the staccato bark of pistols.

The thronged mining town squatting here in the shadows of the Whetstones was swift with death, raw and ruthless. Humanity from all walks of life trod the muddy thoroughfares of Toughnut, Fremont and Allen Streets. Groups on street corners attempted to say what would happen when the Clantons and McLowerys tangled with the Earps, who were sided by fighting Doc Holiday. The problem was a matter of conjecture. There was an open breach between the two factions, everyone knew, and Sheriff Johnny Behan was having his hands full. Other matters of importance centered about the latest escapades of Curly Bill Brochius, the Galeyville gunner; Johnny Ringo, Buckskin Frank Leslie—prominent gunfighters of the country.

And through all this epoch making history of the frontier, other lives wrestled with weighty problems as Bob's thoughts swung to Jo Ropin. Just before Wyatt Earp trundled him down hill, he had seen her face—flashing eyes, red lips and suntanned cheeks. She was the girl he had seen on the streets of Tombstone, the one he had always paused to admire. The sight of her had never failed to ignite sparks of interest within him, and fill him with an unaccountable feeling of warmth. Her beauty had turned the dusty, teeming streets into something quiet and clean as she walked. Her presence to Bob seemed like gazing at a vacation from strife, so easily visioned, so hard to attain. Yet, she had put him in this jail, and he would get out only at her pleasure. That thought rankled.

The excitement of the town did not abate as the first sun lances brought morning. Rather, it broke out anew. Mine shifts changed; crews came boiling from the bowls of the earth to plunge down the slopes to their reckless pleasures before once again taking up their toil. Breakfast was past and the sun growing hot when Marshal Earp swung open the door of Bob's cell.

"All right, Wester," he said. "Miss Ropin sees fit to release you."

Doleful Dobbs surged to the door. The lawman shoved him back. "Hold on, old timer," he warned. "Stony lonesome until the judge sits. Court opens in an hour."

"Lemme outa here!" pleaded Dobbs. "Time's wastin'! I got a man tuh kill—fella name uh Curly Bill. He tromped my toes!"

Bob and the marshal grinned at each other. "Stick around," murmured the gambler. "I'll go your bail—an' forget

about Curly Bill. You've got a long life ahead of you."

"Just as you say, partner," muttered Dobbs morosely. "But I'd gun him shore if it wasn't you askin' me not to! Happy hell an' cold fires!"

The door clanged shut and Earp and Wester turned away. "He tells it scary," grunted the lawman. "But there ain't no teeth in the old saw."

"Mebby," mused Bob.

As Bob and the marshal passed Boomer's cell, Kildea stopped them with, "How about me?"

Gambler and miner duelled with their eyes. There wasn't an ounce of surrender in the scorching glance. Earp shrugged and said, "She didn't say nothin' about you."

Boomer's shoulders slumped. Bob read the utter dejection in the burly miner. To keep such an active giant cooped up—even for a night—was worse than any beating dealt him. Deep within Bob glowed a spark of admiration for this fighting man of the boom towns. Impulsively, he said: "Don't worry, Kildea, I'll see you're out by night."

The miner's eyes flew wide, his battered nose wrinkled, freckles danced. "You—you?" he stammered. "*You* get me out? I'd rather rot!"

Inwardly, Bob grinned. Outwardly, he was cold. "You're out of a job, Kildea!" he snapped. "You'll never be able to pay me five hundred while you're in jail."

Boomer swore luridly and shook the bars. And from the adjoining cell, Doleful Dobbs' inane cackle lifted. "He's pullin' yore cork, jug-head. Pay off, or chin dirt!"

Boomer swung and cursed again, teeth bared. Dobbs taunted him from the bunk. "Quiet, you two!" barked the marshal, as Bob and he filed into the office, closing the door behind them.

JO ROPIN stood there at the edge of the lawman's desk. Vitality and strength glowed in her smooth cheeks. She was clad in imported leather riding breeches. A white, silk blouse heightened her tanned complexion. White half-boots, fancy stitched, encased her tiny feet. She slapped white, long-gauntleted gloves against the battered edge of the desk. Her blue eyes regarded him steadily.

A slow warmth stole over Bob, and he felt a bit ashamed of being before her in his fight-torn tattered clothes.

"Since you've washed," she said appraisingly, "you look a little better. How are your ribs?"

"Better, thanks, ma'am," he mumbled.

"Tell me," she said, "just where or what do you expect to get, by being a gambler?"

The question was so suddenly put, so blunt, that for the moment Bob was nonplussed. The word *gambler* sounded suddenly harsh, coming from her lips—or had she emphasized the word with an edge of scorn? He found the intentness of her eyes disconcerting. He flushed.

"Why—why, I don't know," he faltered. "I never thought of it. I just like the game, that's all. I've never given a thought. . . ."

Her eyes flashed. "Most men don't," she said bitterly. "At least, not until it's too late. According to the men at the mine, you're a puncher from the San Simon Valley. Why don't you go back there now and earn an honest living?"

Anger ignited within Bob. Her obvious domination of men struck at him, and resentment piled up. She was trying to order him as she would a mucker at the Silver Spur. "My game's honest," he countered cryptically.

"That what they all say and the way they all start out," she gave back. "But it doesn't last—it can't! If you're honest, the sharpers will pick you clean. Every

man who plays poker, monte or faro is a potential crook if he can get away with it. You'll have to be if you survive. My father's a gambler, and it's the curse of his life."

She went on, "Until you've followed the game long enough, you won't envy your former ranch life. But when you begin wishing you were back in San Simon—you'll find you can't go. It will be too late. Restlessness will be in your blood; you'll follow gambling until someone kills you or—you'll be playing for pennies in some honkytonk."

Bob regarded her sharply. That was bitter talk for a girl. When she finished, fear lurked deep within her eyes. It was something so startling, so real, that the hatred in her voice failed to blot it out. For a fleeting moment, Jo was only a terror-stricken girl. Her swift, sure competence fell away from her like night before the sun, and she stood now, a woman, alone, and needing the strength of a man to lean upon.

The sight of that killed the resentment building up within Bob and was replaced by a strange, warming tenderness. It seemed as if he had always loved this girl. To hear her speak of the range set up a vague longing within him.

"You say gambling is your father's curse?" he said. "How?"

"You wouldn't understand," she answered. "He—he's such a boy! Owner of the Silver Spur Mine, yet he's prey to every sharper and crook in the business!" She wound up vehemently, "Prey to tinhorns like—"

Again a wave of anger surged savagely through Bob. "Like me!" he ground out. "For a moment I thought you wouldn't be like the rest; but now I see you are. Tinhorn! I sit behind a table and keep the bank. A drunken miner, who's a poor loser, squawks about a crooked game—after he's lost borrowed money. If that makes me a tinhorn—just because a drunken mucker hangs the title to me—then by God, I am one!"

It might have been admiration flitting over her face, but is was gone so quickly, and Bob was so angered, he couldn't tell.

Her words beat through to his ears: "At least, you admit it," her voice was scornful. "That's more than most. I was interested in you for a moment, because you're so young to let the game lure you into a grave. I see that interest has been misplaced."

Her scorn was real. Bob said sharply, "Then why did you release me from jail? You could have left me here."

Jo's eyes narrowed, perhaps to hide the emotion Bob suspected was there. But her dominate aloofness returned and her voice came coldly: "I had you released first in order to teach Boomer a lesson! He needs it!" Then she whirled outside, flung into the saddle of her sorrel. A moment later Bob heard the hoofbeats of her horse pound in a mad tattoo up the dusty street.

He stepped to the door and gazed after her. Slowly, his anger died, but that spark of resentment refused quenching. The domination by which she lorded it over all men, rankled him. Her steel-like hardness left him cold. She, too, had referred to him as a tinhorn.

Moodily, he turned and pulled a roll of bills from his inner pocket. He tossed it on the marshal's desk. "Bail for Dobbs an' Kildea," he muttered and stalked from the jail.

BOB went directly to his room in the Grand Hotel, freshened up and changed clothes. Then he came to the street and headed straight for the Skeleton Saloon.

Opposite the Bird Cage Opera House, he crushed through the swing doors of the Skeleton and made for the far end of the

bar. Jim Vogan, the owner, lounged there, the stub of a cigar rolling between his thick lips. Bob strode up, aware that a slight coldness settled over the man's florid features.

"Back an' ready," announced Bob. "Shall I take over the afternoon play?"

"Why—uh—I don't know," frowned Vogan. "I've got a new fella in here, tryin' his luck. Hang around, though. If play gets heavy tonight mebbyso I can use yuh."

The starch left Bob's body. He said narrowly, "Use me? So it's a freeze-out, eh Vogan?"

"Well—not exactly," mumbled the saloon owner, indifferently. "Yuh see . . ."

"Yeah, I see!" cracked out Bob. "Bein' classed as a tinhorn makes me as welcome in the dealer's chair as a seven-headed sidewinder."

"That's about it," Vogan shrugged. "Men won't play yore game. Tinhorns just ain't wanted! The label's pasted to yuh, Wester. I'd slope fer healthier range, because you're through here. Whyn't yuh try Bisbee?"

A deadly bitterness roweled Bob. "Tombstone'll do!" he barked. "I'm not through here—because I haven't begun! Gimme my guns, Vogan. I'll be seein' yuh!"

The saloon keeper shrugged his pudgy shoulders, sidled around the bar and brought Bob his two bone-handled Colts and bullet-laden belts. Bob Wester strapped them on, tied the holsters down, patted the butts.

"They'll do!" he muttered, as he turned and left the Skeleton.

One of the bartenders spoke to Vogan. "He'll be a customer tuh watch. I wouldn't bet a busted nickel in his game now."

"Yeah," murmured the owner. "He'll buck the tiger till it growls. I'm glad I'm shut uh him. There'll be as much lead spent as money in his game!"

CHAPTER THREE

Tinhorn's Last Deal

UPON his release from jail, Doleful Dobbs moved in with Bob Wester. The oldster immediately took up the chore of cloaking the future with gloom.

"I tell yuh," he said morosely, "yuh ain't got a chance. When yuh run a honest game yuh either go belly-up or rest in the pen, tryin' tuh prove yo're honest. Men just won't even believe a gambler gets his breath through his nose. They figger mebby the sharper has tubin' up his sleeve an' breathes through a hole in his chest.

"I mind oncet in Virginny City. There come a honest gambler an' set up a game. His luck wasn't so hot an' his table went along with neither him nor his players winnin' much. Them hombres sittin' up got tuh figgerin' him fer a guy what was stringin' 'em along until big dough was in sight. Happy hell an' cold fires! That feller heard about it an' started tuh give 'em the ol' razzle-dazzle, takin' their pokes every night. The boys done calmed down an' figgered him a regular after that.

"Gamblers ee-fect jaspers just like Injuns, partner. When a Injun's peaceful an' mindin' his own business a feller's oneasy. Iff'n they're py-rootin' around an' liftin' ha'r—happy hell an' cold. fires! —fellers just pack a gun an' fergit about it. Gamblers that don't fake the ol' razzle-dazzle are as common as a trail herd without no cow-critters!"

Bob pondered the philosophy. "I guess you're right," he admitted grudgingly. "But somehow I just can't see it. There's a place for me in Tombstone, and behind a table! I'm goin' to look for it."

"All right," muttered Doleful. "But keep yore hawglaigs handy."

That evening Bob made the rounds. Dave Rickabaugh and Wyatt Earp, partners in the Oriental Saloon, gravely shook their heads. The owners of the Crystal Palace told Bob he would be hard on their business. Hafford couldn't find a place for him—although he was short on good gambling men.

Bob's spirit dropped like a barometer before a storm. He was bitter when he entered Monte Mayo's Saloon. This was his last chance. He elbowed his way through the throng, nostrils stung by tobacco smoke and the sickly-sweet odor of cheap whiskey, to where Mayo leaned at the far end of the bar.

Monte Mayo was a breed—came from Texas, so he boasted. He was smart, and his shoebutton eyes were never still. A thin, black-papered Mexican cigarette hung between his fingers. Many whispered that Monte Mayo went to bed with that cigarette in his hand and a gun in the other.

Bob's face was sombre, as he stepped up to Mayo. "Got a seat for a gamblin' man?" he queried.

Mayo's snapping eyes scrutinized Bob. The beady little orbs roved over him.

"Who sent yuh?" he asked gutturally.

A thin smile parted Bob's lips. "I came alone," he answered. "From now on nobody sends me, calls me, or stops me!"

The black lashes of Mayo's lowered over his eyes, and a faint smile broke on his lips. "Mebby we can do some business," he rumbled. "Come into my office."

In the short space of twenty feet, to the cubby that passed as Mayo's office, the gambler resigned himself to what seemed inevitable. By a drunken man's hastily flung word, from a losing fight at the Silver Spur Mine, Tombstone had judged him, shunned him like they would a plague. And by her own admission, Jo Ropin inferred that she thought the judgment of these wild, reckless miners was right. He had lost in a game where winning was the only way to stay on top.

He faced Mayo across the desk. "What's the business?" he demanded coldly.

The breed grinned. "I can see yo're gonna be valuable tuh me," he answered. "They gave yuh the last lesson first, eh? Well, Monte Mayo takes care uh men like you—if the fella takes care uh Monte an' plays straight with me." He fingered the lapels of his coat, his pudgy, olive-colored hand near the tell-tale bulge of his shoulder hideout. "You aim tuh play?"

"What's your deal?" insisted Bob.

The swart saloon owner spread his hands depreciatingly and shrugged. "It is easy," he smiled. "In this place here there is no money, but Monte Mayo, he is smart! I 'ave a private room for people to come to my house. Big people who will not be seen in these other dives. All the big miners, actors of the opera house, business men. Hah! They sheer like a sheep, Wester. It is easy! You will come tonight at nine?"

Bob deliberated for a moment. This man was a spider spinning a web to catch the unsuspecting, a cunning schemer who preyed on the elite of Tombstone and took their money by any device.

"If there's gonna be mining men there, count on me," he muttered.

"Good!" said Mayo. "Men are hard to get, Wester, for such a trade. You are presentable, my trade will like that. But—be careful. The last dealer I had fell in love with a girl from the opera house. He lost to her on purpose. He's . . ."

"Up on the hill now," finished Bob. "I savvy."

"I wouldn't want anything to—happen," mumbled Mayo meaningfully.

"Nine o'clock!" snapped Bob, and left the saloon.

AS he swung down the street toward his hotel, the first light touches of night escaped him. Yonder, the Whetstones were purpling at the base and tipped with fiery red on top as the sun's last rays rested there for an instant. Then, with startling suddenness, twilight piled down from the sky and in the north a star winked out.

As he walked, Bob's stubbornness would not let him think of the trail he was taking this night. His mind was a surging flood of bitterness against this raw town. The coldness with which Rickabaugh, Wyatt Earp, Hafford, and the owners of the Crystal Palace had treated him was a barb that stung deeply. And lurking beneath it all was the thought of Jo Ropin, her callousness; her domination over men and the cold way she appraised things. So engrossed, Bob stalked into his hotel.

Doleful Dobbs looked at him and made a wry face. "Well, wash my britches in sheep dip!" he swore. "Fella, yuh look like yuh been eatin' green persimmons an' chasin' 'em down with rattlesnake pizen. Who yuh gonna kill next?"

Broodingly, Bob shook his head. "I hooked up with Monte Mayo."

Doleful whistled his amazement. "Yuh grabbed yoreself a passel uh trouble now! Mayo's so crooked you could stand 'im alongside uh pig's tail an' yuh couldn't tell Mayo unless he had a hat on!"

"What difference does it make?" ground out Bob. "Workin' for him will only make me like other men in this town. Every man's hand—"

"—an' the gal's too," interrupted Doleful, sagely, "is raised ag'in yuh. Yuh ain't foolin' me, son—not any. Yo're just damn fool enough tuh stay an' try to prove she's wrong. I see 'er lookin' at yuh today when you was trampin' down the street. There was a lot in her face. . . ."

"An' all of it implyin' what she thinks of me," snapped Bob, and left the room.

"Yeah," murmured Doleful at his going. "What she thought about yuh was there. But yo're takin' a road tonight that'll never let yuh find out just what. Happy hell an' cold fires!"

At precisely nine o'clock that evening, a light knock brought Monte Mayo to the door. "Come in!" he grunted.

Bob was surprised at what he saw there. The reception room was in good taste, filled with costly furniture imported from the East. As Mayo nodded his head, Bob followed, glancing through the doorways of the rooms as he strode past. He would never have dreamed of such a place in Tombstone. Those rooms were brilliantly lighted by crystal-hung chandeliers. Chairs were ornate, heavy with carving. The two rooms were pretentious. At the stairway, Mayo paused.

"Wait up there," he commanded. "Play ain't ready tuh open yet. You'll set up to the poker table. You'll have two cappers in the game with yuh. Pay no attention tuh them. Between 'em will be a fella I want stripped. The cards will be pictured. It'll be worth five thousand to yuh."

Picture cards marked! Bob suppressed the repugnance that swept him. He had let himself in for this, and now he would go on through. Five thousand for a single night's work! Before many of those nights, he would be a power in Tombstone. Mentally, he toyed with the idea of buying into the Silver Spur Mine just for —he didn't know what.

Monte turned to the door and Bob started upstairs. He looked back over his shoulder. Mayo was admitting two beautifully-gowned ladies. One was the Tombstone Nightingale, songstress at the Bird Cage Opera House. With her was the daughter of the owner of the Copper Queen Mine. Both were lovely. Behind them came two men. They were dressed in broadcloth, flowing black stocks and

top hats. The virus of the coming game began creeping into Bob's body and slow excitement began building within him.

When he had come to the head of the stairs again, he stopped, startled. In the doorway stood Boomer Kildea and with him was a man whose hair was iron-gray. He wore a plain business suit and kept nervously glancing over his shoulder and twirling at the mustache above his lips. The drone of conversation blotted the words they spoke from Bob. He saw the oldster stride for the front room, obviously pleased at getting inside the door. Then Bob's eyes were narrowing as Mayo pulled out a roll of bills, peeled off a few and handed them to Boomer, who winked and vanished out the door.

Bob came slowly down the stairs, troubled over what he had just seen. Who could Boomer be bringing here, getting paid for it? Had he not been able to get his job back at the Silver Spur? Was he acting as outside build-up for Mayo?

Mayo's oily voice lifted. "Ladies an' gents, yore dealer, Bob Wester! I had 'im come all the way from Tucson tuh deal in my place. Make yore play folks, an' Wester'll show yuh a good time!"

An inward coldness gripped Bob. These people were certainly lambs to be easily sheered. He took his seat behind the table, his back to the wall. Directly across from him sat the man with the iron-gray hair. On either side sat the cappers, who raised their eyebrows ever so slightly at Bob and grinned faintly.

Bob's eyes narowed on the oldster. His face was vaguely familiar, yet his identity for the moment escaped Bob. The chin had a familiar, resolute set; the eyes were widely-spaced and blue. Bob frowned. This man was a miner—an owner or superintendent. And then, in a sudden flash it came to him, as he realized the resemblance to Jo Ropin. This was her father, owner of the Silver Spur.

For an instant Bob went ice-cold, a flood of revulsion sweeping him. Then he stiffened. What was old Brad Ropin to him—even if he was Jo's father? He was a weakling; that much was certain. He was also Bob's enemy, just as most gambling men in Tombstone were his enemies. Here was just another of those who had blazed Bob's trail along the crooked gambling frontier. Another who, by burning the brand of dishonesty upon Bob must be made to pay the cost.

Gripped in his cold anger, nothing seemed to matter to Bob excepting that. He began to riffle the cards. . . .

PLAY began. In the brilliant light suspended over the table, the Tombstone Nightingale looked callous and hard. Her lips drew poutingly as she lost, grew into grim lines of determination as she won and plunged heavier. The daughter of the Copper Queen Mine owner giggled, played foolishly and didn't care.

Bob played like an automaton. His eyes peeked out from narrowed lids at the three directly across the table from him. He caught the ferret looks of the cappers, the tightening and relaxing of their lips as they silently signaled him. Bob played accordingly—and the man with the iron-gray hair lost steadily. After a hand where Bob took the large pot with aces over kings, the man spoke for the first time.

"I don't see how you do it," he said thickly. "You readin' my face?"

"Yeah," murmured Bob.

Everybody laughed but the oldster. His lips set grimmer, grew bloodless. Bob played methodically on. At last the Tombstone Nightingale got up and left the room, followed by the girl. Mayo showed them to the door. Play went on. Pots grew staggeringly high. Bob looked at Mayo, then at the money the mine owner was chunking in. Mayo grinned and

nodded. Bob raised the limit at the oldster's request.

In fifteen minutes, the oldster was broke. He left the table for a moment, argued and pleaded with Monte Mayo, wrote out an IOU and was back. And in that moment, Bob had a picture of what the lure of gambling will do to a man.

Bob played a little more slowly now, for inside him was building a feeling he could not put down. A feeling that he would be taking the livelihood from this man by winning his money. And with it came the feeling that he was dealing the girl he loved a cowardly blow—a blow from which she would never recover.

The oldster's losses had become a staggering sum, more than sixty thousand. Bob turned up two pair to strip the oldster clean for the second time.

"Mayo!" called the man huskily. "Mayo, c'mere!"

A man stuck his head into the room and said, "Monte's gone downtown. He'll be back in a little while."

"Can't wait," mumbled the oldster. "You'll take my IOU, won't yuh, dealer? Everybody in Tombstone knows me. Brad Ropin's the name. I own the Silver Spur. How about it?"

Bob glanced hastily at the two cappers flanking Ropin. They were watching him intently, their impassive eyes studying his every move.

One of them nodded. The other said, "Sure, the dealer'll cash for yuh. Hell! He's gotta, or Monte'll see about his clock."

The threat did not escape Bob. The two house men seemed to settle in their chairs now—waiting.

Evenly, Bob said, "Don't you think you've had enough, Mister Ropin? There's always another night."

"Damn another night!" swore the Silver Spur owner. "T'ain't every night I can run away from my girl an' leave her to show the mine to a bunch of buyers. She's takin' 'em through the shafts tonight, son, so I kin howl until she catches me. Cash this fer ten thousand!"

In this tension-filled moment, Bob realized why Jo Ropin hated gambling so much. This had been done to her father before. He was a slave to the game. And Boomer had brought him here—for money.

Slow rage ignited within Bob. His mind made a lightning like decision and he picked up the IOU, shoved the cash back across the table. The two housemen settled back in their chairs. Play began again. Bob's lids covered his eyes and he watched the cappers closely.

Brad Ropin won the first pot. "New money, fresh blood in the game does it," he cackled. The housemen laughed with him. It was good poker to string the old boy along.

The next hand around, the capper's eyes flew up in signal now to press the opener of Ropin's. Bob read the backs of the oldster's cards. He held two aces and two kings, a deuce was the off card. Ropin opened with a thousand. Everyone stayed, but wouldn't raise until they saw whether he would stand pat and bluff or draw to a full house. On the draw Ropin stayed. Each houseman took two cards. When they picked them up puzzled frowns creased their brows. Bob should have given them something to fill out so they could have the mine owner beaten. But he hadn't. Ropin pushed in his stack for showdown.

Grim purpose gripped Bob. "Is that all?" he taunted.

Ropin colored. His teeth bared in a snarl. "Not by a damn sight!" he cracked out. "I'll put up my mine against the bank! Play it—or pull freight!"

BOB looked at the two cappers. They bent forward, lips set, eyes beady. This was it! This was Monte Mayo's play. Bob Wester would make the killing alone. It was in the bag.

"Write it out!" ground out Bob.

Paper and pencil was rushed to Brad Ropin's hand. As he wrote that hand trembled slightly and a haunting fear crept unbidden to his eyes. Two pair! Bluff! But the poisonous tentacles of the game had eaten too far into Brad Ropin's vitals for him to back out now. Bob felt nothing but scorn for this weakling whose character was completely submerged by an inner passion.

Then he was pausing in his condemnation of Brad Ropin. This was what Jo Ropin had meant would happen to *him!* A burning blaze of understanding swept him like a prairie fire, and he shuddered. In flashing pictures he saw himself as this man, risking the future, tossing away security, an abject slave to an excitement that could not be quenched. A victim of a game from which there was no return, once the poison steeped into your soul. In a flash, Bob knew that this was the last hand of poker he would ever play.

Brad Ropin had the slip made out now. "Chuck it in!" ordered Bob tersely. "An' pitch 'em face up!"

The housemen bent forward. The Silver Spur was Monte Mayo's now. Brad Ropin spread two pair, aces and kings. Slowly, Bob shook his head and threw down his hand, hastily mixing them with the deck. "Yuh got me beat!" he said sotto-voiced.

With a glad cry, Brad Ropin reaped in his golden harvest, his eyes glittering. The two housemen surged up, Bob matching them, stiffening as killer lights flashed in their eyes.

"Get Mayo quick!" one of them called over his shoulder, his eyes never leaving Bob.

Brad caught the play, the tension sheering into his victory-racing mind. "What the hell?" he growled. "Why—why—"

"Shut up!" spat the houseman.

Mayo barged into the room, his shoe button eyes flicking over the stack of money within Brad's splayed fingers, then to Bob, who waited poker-straight and rigid, his hands dangling at his sides.

"The ol' double cross!" barked one of his henchmen.

"I told yuh, Wester—" began Mayo.

"I lost," ground out Bob. "Just what have you-all in mind?"

"This!" shouted Mayo, and his hand flashed to his shoulder.

Like a cougar crouched to strike, Bob matched Monte's swift move. He knew the housemen were swooping for their gun hideouts. He was burnt in the middle, and stacked against a three-way draw. His gun spoke first, and Mayo spun from the impact of the slug, but not before the saloon-owner had triggered his gun. The shot cracked into the floor, and Mayo followed it—dead. Savagely, Bob swung on the nearest houseman and rocked the hammer, instinctively, his other gun fired at the other figure, but Bob knew he had small hopes of targeting.

A hot iron seemed to sheer across his left arm and drop it helpless to his side. He saw Brad Ropin shove one killer off balance as he shot at the second man. That capper folded like unstarched cloth and sank to the floor. And Brad's shove gave him time to swing his good arm on the crooked gambler and plant a bullet between his eyes.

The room tossed to the gun concussions; gunsmoke blanketed the living and dead. Brad Ropin looked at Bob. Bob said, "Thanks!" and tilted his gun toward the door where men were crowding in, a begrimed miner in the lead.

"Don't shoot!" cried the mucker, laboring under terrific excitement. "Mister

Ropin—there—there's been a cave-in at the Silver Spur!"

Bob's gun clattered to the floor and he impulsively stepped forward. Color drained from Ropin's cheeks. He grabbed the man's arm in a vise-like grip. "My daughter?" he gasped.

"She's on the second level," croaked the miner. "Her an' the party!"

"Good God!" breathed Ropin, and ran from the room.

For an instant, Bob stood there, stunned. His bullet-burned arm ached, but that pain was supplanted by a fear for Jo. Then, he, too, was running with that mob, out into the cold night, up the slope of the Silver Spur.

All Tombstone was charging up the hill. Curses crowded Bob's lips, his lungs sobbed for air, his heart screamed for speed and his mind prayed that Jo Ropin was safe.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death's Gamble

THE dark, gaping opening that was the Silver Spur Mine entrance yawned from the side of the hill. People packed about it, gazing fascinated at the yawning, black bore in morbid concentration. A weighty hush held their speech. Bob Wester fought himself through the mob and brushed past the miners holding the crowd back. There was a man on the ground with others working over him. It was Boomer Kildea. The boss powder-monkey had a lump on the side of his head and now was coming to.

"Get up, Boomer!" ground out Bob. "Tell me about this!"

With the help of two men, the giant was raised to his feet. He swayed dizzily. "Nothin' much tuh tell," he mumbled. "I was walkin' about fifty feet ahead uh the party when the second level roof let go. A shoring cracked me across the head. These fellers drug me out. Jo Ropin an' three engineers are down there behind the slide—without a chance in hell!"

The way Boomer Kildea said it, the utter fatality in his voice, weakened Bob and turned his blood into an icy current. Words choked in his throat. There was a commotion among the crowd and Brad Ropin' burst upon them, his eyes panic-stricken, iron-gray hair disheveled. He skidded to a stop in front of Boomer, stared at the swaying giant and croaked, "My daughter!" Then, blindly, he lunged for the tunnel.

"Get him, boys!" shouted Boomer, and three men caught Ropin and dragged him back. Boomer grabbed him by the shoulder and held him. Kildea said, "Don't be a fool, Ropin! You'd only lose your own life goin' down there. The whole tunnel's ready to go. Nobody can go down!"

Doleful Dobbs joined the group, glared owlishly, his lips drooping, and Bob steeled himself. Grim-faced he swept a miner's hat from a man's head, jammed it on and palmed his gun. Slowly, he inched toward the tunnel.

"Stay back, all of you!" he warned. "I'm going down there! If there's a way out, I'll find it. If not . . ."

"Hold on!" shouted Dobbs. "I'm comin' too. Happy hell an' cold fires, partner! Fust chance I've had in my life tuh get in on excitement!"

"Stay back!" ordered Bob, his pain-twisted face pallid in the torch light. "One man'll have chances a dozen won't. Be seein' yuh-all in hell!"

Then the ominous maw of the Silver Spur swallowed him.

Down shaft a way, Bob paused, lighted the wick of the light fastened to his cap.

He hadn't gone a hundred yards when the scrape of boot behind gave him pause. He turned his light on Doleful Dobbs. The oldster cackled.

"Yuh can't git shut uh me that easy,

son," he said. "Me, I'm a miner from who laid the chunk. The tunnels I don't know about ain't been dug yet. C'mon! Time's wastin'!"

The staunchness of this whang-leather oldster kindled a warmth within Bob. He clapped Doleful on the back and led on.

The tunnel bored into the bowels of the earth, curving this way and that following the vein of ore.

Now the tunnel veered sharply downward. Doleful's "Look!" spun Bob alert.

A tiny fire winked up-tunnel, glowing like a star, bobbing and gyrating. Then came the heavy clump of boots and Boomer Kildea loomed large near them. In his arms were sticks of dynamite, caps and fuse.

"How in the hell did yuh think you'd break down the cave-in?" he scowled. "Shovel it away with a toothpick?"

"No," countered Doleful hotly, "but we could shore as hell use yore spade chin, now that yo're here!"

"No time for that!" barked Bob as the two stiffened like mastiffs, teeth bared.

"C'mon!" grunted Boomer, and took the lead.

AS Bob followed, tramping deeper into the bowels of the earth, his strength ebbed. The wound in his arm burned like scalding water and it taxed his muscles to set them against the waves of pain shooting from the hurt. He resigned himself to the fatalism bred into him by range life. He would be lucky indeed to leave the shaft alive. Yet, he'd rather not leave it at all than without Jo Ropin. He must get her back to the top, no matter what.

Panoramic pictures paraded before his eyes. He saw again her flashing interest upon his liberation from jail. He heard again her emphasis on range-life. He knew now that Jo Ropin wanted to live where the vistas are broad, where the stars come out at night with glittering splendor, where life is what you make it, and not a thing guided by an impulsive few. And suddenly, he found himself envying that kind of life over what he had been doing.

Boomer led them to the break. Ahead timbers lay crossed and jumbled, some straining with the weight they still held.

"We'll have tuh take it easy," Boomer cautioned, his voice weary. "Threadin' through that stuff is like walkin' barefoot on the fires uh hell. One sneeze or misstep an' she'll come down. God only knows what's holdin' it up now."

Gingerly, they wormed their way to the place where the grim barrier of dirt blocked off the tunnel and made the door for the tomb beyond. Using picks and shovels they found in the shaftway, Bob and Doleful tore into the loose dirt and shale.

Without a word, they worked. Boomer and Bob put their caps at vantage points so the light would benefit all. It was ticklish work.

All three stiffened, cold sweat breaking out on their bodies as a timber snapped with a loud report.

"We're gonners!" croaked Boomer, his eyes wide and stark.

"See yuh in hell!" muttered Doleful, his head bowed, waiting.

Bob said nothing.

But it didn't happen! For a moment they waited. Then they were back and making the dirt fly, each muttering his own thankfulness silently. It was Bob's shovel that struck the rock.

"What the hell!" he swore, stepping back and wiping sweat away.

Boomer scrambled to the place. Cautiously, he ran his fingers around its edge. A low curse shook him. He picked up a small rock. Taking a deep breath, he tapped it sharply against the boulder blocking the passage.

Bob's body grew tense. He knew what Boomer was doing. He was seeing if the

rock jutted into the chamber that held Jo Ropin. If it did. . . ! All three bent their ears close as they could, their breathing hushed.

For what seemed a year they waited. Then, muffled but plain, came the answer. They were still alive! Bob muttered a croak of joy; Doleful swore; Boomer nodded his head thoughtfully. "She's thick through," he mumbled. "Not much of a chance."

"Whatever it is, we've got to take it," ground out Bob.

"I ain't askin' odds," said Doleful simply.

"Can't be done," reiterated Boomer doggedly. "One of us'll be killed."

"I'll be the one," Bob said softly. "Just tell me what to do."

Bitterness settled over Boomer's face, his lips dripped scorn. "Tinhorn tuh the last, ain't yuh? Grandstandin', like yuh did the day yuh come up the hill to collect. . . . Well, none uh yore tricks will save yuh here, fella. Let's clear out an' get some uh the boys."

A flood of hate shook Bob. He clipped, "I had a hunch you were yella, Boomer. I almost brought the dog out in you on the hill. You showed your stripe by guidin' Brad Ropin to Mayo's—an' takin' pay for it. I'm a tinhorn, eh? Tinhorns are gods compared to you. If you hadn't led Ropin to the wolves, he'd be the one here now instead of Jo. An' if we don't get her out, you've killed her as sure as you're a foot high. You'll answer to me!"

Boomer relaxed and gazed about him abstractedly. "Get some loose shorin'," he said as if in a dream. "An' some flat boards fer overhead. . . ."

GOADED by the thought of success, Bob worked like a trooper until headboards had been driven over the rock to keep the ceiling from caving in. Then shoring were put up to brace the overhead. Boomer turned and left them for almost ten minutes. Bob and Doleful rested, mopped sweat from their brows and silently contemplated each other.

In their eyes was the question, "Will Boomer come back?"

He did, and he brought with him a star drill, used by the miners to drill holes for powder shots, and a single-jack hammer. Cautiously, he went to work drilling into the rock. When two charges were set, caps and fuse attached, he stepped back.

"We're ready," he announced flatly.

Bob didn't speak; he just reached out and clapped Boomer on the back. The giant turned, gazed deep into Bob's eyes. A man to man understanding passed between them. Then Boomer ordered abruptly, "You'll have tuh stand by that shore, an' you, Dobbs, by the other. Brace 'em with yore bodies. I ain't sure which way the charge'll send the splinters, but I ain't been boss powder-monkey uh the Silver Spur fer nothin'. That rock'll split, crumble in the center and fall away. If the overhead holds, they'll be able tuh squeeze through. Brace 'em! You asked for it!"

Doleful grinned. "Like gettin' a slice uh hell, eh son? Don't know whether yore part'll be hot or cold. Let's have it, Hatchet-face!"

"Shoot the works!" said Bob and took his post, wedging his body against the earth to keep the shore from jerking out under the concussion of the shot.

Boomer lit the fuse. It crackled and flamed into a sinuous, crawling thing. Fascinated, three pairs of eyes watched the sputtering cord. It leaped and writhed, filling the tunnel with acrid fumes. Boomer followed directly behind the burning end. And so intent were Bob and Doleful on the fuse, that they failed to note the steady advance of Boomer Kildea. His booted feet grew closer and closer to the hissing fuse, and came into the tail of Bob's

eyes. He looked up, stiffening with horror.

Boomer was crouched, following the spark with avid interest. His face was set and hard, his lips drawn into bloodless lines. The intent of the boss powdermoney smote Bob with the force of a swung sledge.

"Get back!" he shouted. "You *fool*, Boomer!"

But there was no stopping that terrible advance. Doleful screamed. "You'll git blown tuh bits. Hold off, yuh damn jughead!"

But Boomer kept on. Bob's knees became watery. He realized that he was looking upon the greatest sacrifice man can make—that of giving his life so that others might live. Boomer was bent upon throwing himself upon the rock at the point of explosion and thus smothering the charge to save Bob and Doleful. Fascinated, all they could do was watch.

The fuse sputtered into the little holes drilled by the miner. Then Boomer coiled and flung himself against the charge. The charge set off, and through the dull thunder rolling up the tunnel there knifed a thin scream of agony.

Bob's body seemed to expand, blown up by the concussion crushing him. It deflated with an awful suddenness, leaving him weak, stunned. Dust whirled and eddied through the passageway. Then he was jarred from his coma by the sound of a girl's voice, fervent and tearful. . . .

THE next few moments were haze to Bob. Strong hands helped him from behind his post. Doleful was hollering in his ear to make himself heard, for he, too, was deafened by the explosion.

"Fit as a fiddle!" he shouted. "Didn't get nothin' but a showerin' uh dirt. Hell! A mule could uh kicked more mud in my face. The whole charge went yore way."

"Get Boomer!" muttered Bob.

Doleful hauled him to the boss powdermonkey's side. He was still alive, but a bloody froth bubbled on his lips.

"Boomer—" Bob said, and choked up.

"Think nothin' of it, feller," croaked the miner hoarsely. "All I needed was tuh have a man show me the way. You were him, fella. Tinhorn—hell! I was wrong—dead wrong. Tell 'em that somebody—tell 'em—tell. . . ." And he died.

Bob rose stiffly, swayed from weakness. "There was a man," he said softly.

"Yes," said Jo. "He was."

Bob looked at her in the semi-gloom. Jo's affected hardness seemed to have left her. She stood before him now with her soul bared, the mean little light playing ghostly shadows over her strained face.

Bob felt a warm flood surge through him. Deep within her eyes was an emotion he had thought he would never see.

"You were right, that day in the jail," he said slowly. "A man's gotta know when to quit. I've seen one tonight that couldn't quit in time. I've played my last hand. This was a cold deck, but we won, thanks to Boomer. If you'll. . . ."

"Go to San Simon?" she whispered. "I tried to tell you I would when I released you from jail. But you were so stubborn—and wouldn't understand."

"Hell, Jo, you were so vague—an' don't explain well," Bob countered and put his one good arm about her. "Now there'll be plenty of time for that."

"Happy hell an' cold fires!" said Doleful rising from the dead miner's side. "Me, I'm goin' tuh San Simon, stitch some saddles in the sun an' teach some Wester buttons how to rope an' ride. Yeah—an' show 'em how I buffaloed Curly Bill, an' some uh the other boys!"

THE END

Hell Comes to the

By William F. Bragg

(Author of "The Breaking of Hard Rock Camp," etc.)

That dead-or-alive price on Brazos Red's scalp brought a hundred blood-money posse-men pounding hard along his trail. Yet, his chief peril lay not in the reward-hungry lawmen, but in a desperate, hard-pressed girl who needed Brazos' helping hand—and in a bunch of greedy renegades, who swore to collect on both!

Broken Horn

A Brazos Red Novelette

THE dust of two days hard riding lay heavy upon Brazos Red and his tired horse when he struck the main trail into the Broken Horn National Forest. The deep crease cut by a high-powered bullet along the swell of his saddle was a vivid and constant reminder that he had been running for his life, hiding from the hounds of the law like a harried coyote. This was the first time, since he had quit the cover of the deep timber, that he had dared appear where free men rode.

And here before him, tacked to the trunk of a tall lodge-pole pine on the reserve line, was the reward placard that had cursed Brazos Red for two years. Then he had been a loyal puncher in New Mexico, fighting for his brand in a cattle

war, and had drawn iron one jump ahead of a foeman. But that enemy happened to have a deputy's badge pinned to his vest, and since that day five states had sought Brazos for the reward of five thousand dollars on his red head—a reward which read, "Dead or alive."

The New Mexican sighed. His raw-boned frame relaxed as he studied the weather-faded picture of himself. It was a good likeness and gave complete details, even to the gun dimple in his right cheek, a mark put there by a glancing bullet.

If the law had thrown its net out ahead, he must again take to deep forests, and fight to cross the main divide of the Broken Horns, to reach the range eastward where riders might not know him.

He decided that he would not regret quitting this mountain section. Two days before, they had recognized him when he rode at dusk into a small settlement to buy supplies.

Not daring to bid him throw up his hands and surrender, a half dozen men had ambushed Red as he walked his gray down the dusty street toward the hills. Shotguns had roared, six-guns had boomed and thundered and one tall marksman, bolder than the rest, had slanted a rifle and almost cut Red from the saddle leather, as the New Mexican flogged his pony down the street and into a dark alley entrance. There a way lay clear, across a field on the edge of pine woods.

But so long as he lived, Red believed he would never forget the rifleman who had marked his saddle. The man had the clear drop yet he had not shouted for Red to surrender. Coldly he had aimed and let drive. All for five thousand dollars —easier collected on a dead outlaw than a live one.

As Red swung his cayuse away from the forest line, from the plain trail where tracks in the dust indicated the recent passage of shod horses and cattle, he vowed that he would not draw rein until the summit of the Broken Horns lay between himself and this unfriendly country, inhabited by men so anxious for quick wealth they would kill on sight to acquire it.

A scrawled note on the bottom of the reward notice was signed by Deputy Dick Rains, of Canyon County. Rains had written there in pencil to warn all punchers going into the national forest that they might encounter the wanted man. They were warned that the outlaw was dangerous, and to show him no mercy.

When Brazos started his flanking ride up into the high country from the reserve entrance, he believed the rifleman who had marked his saddle might be this same Dick Rains. He hoped that somewhere up in a lonely pass, in the land of bald eagles and grizzly bears, he would come face to face with Rains and have a chance to shoot it out with this bushwhacking officer.

RED was not a killer, but there were limits to a man's patience. Even an outlaw, he believed, deserved a chance for life. And here in Canyon County, neither Dick Rains nor his posse had given him that chance.

In the pocket of Red's chaps reposed the slug that he had dug from his saddle after the escape from town. It wasn't soft-nosed, like a Colt or carbine bullet. It might be a clue to the identity of the treacherous rifleman.

Higher he mounted through the blue timber, his wise gray picking a silent course around downed logs mossy with age, stepping soundlessly on the thick carpet of pine needles. Then the woods ended and gray boulders loomed along a bare ridge that led upward toward the higher, snow-capped peaks.

In a steep-walled valley, after he had

crossed the ridge, Red heard the thunder of a swift-running mountain creek and caught occasional flashes of white where the sun beat down on rapids. This he knew to be one of the many prongs of Powder River, hurrying down through its granite gorge to swell the volume of that historic stream.

The thought of Powder River brought a grin to Red's tanned face. Everywhere a man rode in northern Wyoming, he couldn't get far from Powder River, for its many branches threaded the high mountains for hundreds of miles. Along these quiet valleys, Sioux and Cheyenne war parties had fled in the old days before baffled blue-clad troopers. Skin-clad trappers had sought and killed beavers on the headwaters. Lonely punchers had trailed the first longhorns from Texas into hidden mountain basins. And long-riders like Brazos Red, had since ridden for their lives along these old blazed trails.

It didn't amaze Red when he struck a dim path along the eastern flank of the divide above the roaring stream. This trail twisted and quartered upward, always under the cover of scrawny jack-pines and quaking asp. There was safety on a trail long forgotten.

Or so Red believed, until his gray checked abruptly at a turn and pointed its ears toward cattle just ahead.

Red's blue eyes narrowed under his faded old hat. He leaned forward over his bullet-riddled saddle, his keen gaze studying the longhorns. Their tongues lolled. From their ribby look and their slow pace, he knew they had been driven hard and recently. That meant punchers must be near.

Because of the reward notice down country, they would be keeping a weather eye open for Brazos Red. This was a range of kill on sight.

The New Mexican drew his carbine, slanted it across his saddle fork. He freed the six-gun, tied to his right leg, so that it would jump from leather without delay. Then, silent as a gray wolf on the prowl, he turned off the blazed trail and edged his pony up the gentle slope where the timber thickened. He had decided to reach the bare ridge. Riding there, his eyes could sweep both flanks of the hog-back that led toward a pass in the peaks, a pass as narrow in appearance as the V-shaped cut of an ax in a tree.

Below him, he heard the occasional crash of wood as a longhorn, swinging off the trail to reach for a bit of grass, stepped on a dead pine pole. Yet Red was puzzled. Why had no punchers shouted or whistled to frighten the stray back to the herd.

The gray poked its way through a scattered growth of quaking asp, and started out into a small green clearing.

There three horsemen loomed before Red. They had come suddenly into sight from the rocks above, furtive as coyotes. They were not fifty jumps distant. The leader spotted the outlaw even as Red reined his gray down sharply.

This man wore a tall black hat. That was about all Red had time to observe before a rifle cracked. A bullet zipped past his right ear. It wasn't the roaring bark of a black-powder gun but the dry, smart crack of a high-powered rifle.

The two followers of the black-hatted man fanned out. Half swung in their saddles, they slammed six-gun lead at the New Mexican.

Fighting for time to turn his horse, Red flipped up his carbine, pulled trigger even before the gunstock struck his shoulder curve. The bullet, pitched hastily, hit the crown of his black hat. Red saw the puff of dust.

The leader yelled, "Git him! Five thousand dollars on the hoof!"

But Red had swung his gray on the space of a quarter, spurred the startled

mount into a flying leap over a downed log, and crashed into the covering brush.

Down the slippery slope he raked his panting pony from withers to flanks. It was easy enough to be pitched off and break a neck or an arm. But Red gambled on that. He had vowed grimly that he would never go back alive to New Mexico to stretch hemp.

HE heard the boom of hoofs on the hollow mountain soil as the black-hatted rider led his men into the quaker patch. Then came the snap and crackle of dried branches.

Red didn't pause to fight. He reached the blazed trail, but it was packed tightly with filing cattle. His quirt rose and fell, smacking down on broad and flinching backs until a space opened and he shot through. He grinned as he put a shield of beef between himself and pursuit. The dust kicked up by the longhorns rose like a smoke screen.

Humped over his horn, calling on the gray for its last ounce of heart and courage, Brazos Red climbed toward the knife-like gash in the high country that loomed as his only way of escape.

He outdistanced the cattle, came at last into the rocks of the high country. Here the timber grew in scanty patches. He began passing alpine fir and the rock chucks whistled shrilly from their perches on mammoth heaps of broken granite. There were occasional melting snowbanks along the way with miry meadows lower down where seepage had turned the earth into bogs.

Red rode at an easier pace for up here, ten thousand feet above sea level, the air was thin. His gray panted and fought for wind wherever the trail took a steep slant. He passed a rock monument and pile of wood on a knoll, and took it for a trail marker.

Except for the wind in the pines, the distant thunder of streams deep down in canyons, it was silent up here, with the eternal silence of the high country. Long since, the sounds of pursuit had died away, nor had Red heard for some time the echoing bellows of longhorn cattle laboring up the mountain.

He pushed back his hat and let the hot sun strike full in his face. He liked that hearty warmth, that bite of life-giving energy through his layer of range tan. Again he had outdistanced the law. With luck, he would cross the Broken Horns, reach Montana and escape the New Mexican gallows.

Then, as the gray jogged through a patch of jack-pines, three evenly-spaced shots sounded just ahead.

Red reined down as though his pony had bumped into a stone wall. Every Westerner knew the meaning of three spaced shots, it was a signal of destress. No white man failed to heed it.

In the cover of the jack-pines, Brazos Red fought another battle. His heart bade him respond to the signal. But his mind, alarmed that this might be a trap, bade him swing off the ridge and avoid the gunman ahead.

Then Brazos Red sighed and shrugged his weary shoulders. He was an outlaw. By all rules, he should have heeded the warning of his mind. Instead, he let his heart rule. He worked to the edge of the timber.

And it was there he saw danger.

His alert gaze took in a patch of bright green that he recognized as a mountain bog. A wise puncher would never have ridden a horse across that deceiving surface which hid bottomless black slime

But a horse was struggling for its life in knee-deep mud. At every lunge, the pony sank deeper. So it would fight on until, strength failing, it would go down to cold and choking death.

Twenty paces from the bog's margin

a man was also in the slimy death trap. A slender fellow with hat jammed down too tightly that Red couldn't make out his features. Apparently the rider, after getting bogged down, had slid from the saddle to lessen the weight on the struggling horse, and so had also been caught by the black mud.

In a desperate effort to call help, this trapped rider had drawn a six-gun and blasted three bullets into the air. And the New Mexican outlaw had answered. With hunters on his hot trail, he rode slowly into the open, shoved his carbine into its rawhide sheath under the stirrup fender, and began to unstrap his rope.

"Don't kick an' flounder!" he shouted. "Yuh damn fool, don't yuh see the more yuh kick, the deeper yuh sink in?"

The struggler heard that sharp yell and quit fighting. He sank down limply. The hat tilted back, revealing to Red a mud-streaked face, bright yellow hair reaching to slender shoulders. And then Red heard a sob.

"Gosh," he gasped, amazed, "A gal! Bogged down on the highest divide in a hundred miles! Gosh!"

CHAPTER TWO

Killers' Rendezvous

A YELLOW-HAIRED girl was fighting for life here where silent peaks loomed above this bog of death! She had maintained nerve and courage until Red appeared and had possessed wit enough to draw a gun and sound the distress call. But with rescue at hand, her courage broke. She lay in the black slime that rose lowly, smooth as velvet, strong as iron.

Red spurred his gray to the bog's edge. It wasn't a long cast for a rope. A hundred times he had speared a pony from a cavvy at twice the distance and without turning a hair.

But now his hands were unsteady, and he suffered from a queer dimness of vision. Amazement still filled his mind that a girl, a pretty one despite all the black mud, should be here in this high country death-trap.

He saw too that her efforts had weakened her. Fear struck his heart. He could not ride his horse into the bog, nor could he walk across its quivering surface. That would put him in the same predicament.

"Ma'am," he shouted, and hoarsely, "yuh got to put up yore arms! Give me somethin' to shoot at!"

She didn't respond at first. He drove his flinching pony ahead until the snorting animal drew back from the sucking slime that threatened to drag it down.

Red sat there tensely, his noose shaped for a throw, his hoarse voice pleading with the girl to show nerve and put up her arms. He forgot himself and relapsed into strong cow country language. That must have whipped up her anger, put fire into her blood. For she flung up her arms.

The noose whistled toward her arms from which hung black mud. The loop snapped toward the target—and missed by a foot. Red groaned. For the girl wrung by terror and half out her wits, began to struggle, and thrash about like a trout landed on a streams' bank.

Swiftly Red recoiled his lariat. He wouldn't have time for more than one cast. He cursed the shake of his hands and the sun in his eyes. His long jaw tightened, deep lines ran from the base of his broad nose down to the corners of his tight, thin-lipped mouth.

The noose snapped back, shook out into an open loop without kinks. Red flung it with the sweeping easy motion of the working puncher who snares a frisky pony out of a close-packed cavvy of a range corral.

He groaned, for it appeared he had

missed again. But then he saw that the girl had thrust up an arm as the rope hissed past her. She had drawn the loop down under her shoulders.

"Hang tight, ma'am!" Red shouted. "You'll be high an' dry in a jiffy."

He dared not wait longer for her to protect her body from possible rope burning. He swung the gray, took his dallies around the horn and spurred ahead.

The girl screamed once, a choking cry of pain, for the rope was burning as Red slid her out of the mire like a sled. She lay on the bank, eyes closed, black mud covering what had once been trim riding garments. She had lost one boot.

Out of the saddle, fearful that she might be badly hurt, Red bent over her. He scooped up snow water with his hat from a nearby puddle, washed the mud off her face and clumsily sought to scrape it off her clothing.

The bite of the icy water revived her. She opened a pair of eyes, blue as mountain daisies and stared up into Red's own. She smiled, a faint but gallant smile.

"We made it!" she whispered.

Then the smile faded. She sat up and saw her pony struggling for its life. She pleaded wildly with Red. He shook his head, for twenty feet of muck lay between this bank and the trapped horse.

And also he remembered that not far down this blazed trail, a black-hatted man led two followers on an outlaw's hot trail.

He had saved this girl. Why linger, then, to rescue a horse? The pursuit would come up and aid her.

The girl sprang up. Before Red could halt her, she started back into the bog, straight toward her pony. Just in time he flung his arms around her slender body and drew her to safety. She fought with him, digging her finger nails into his restraining hands, her blue eyes flashing fiercely.

"You coward!" she blazed at him. "You'd let a helpless horse suffer!"

Then she began to sob. Her head drooped against the outlaw's shoulder.

"Ma'am," Red said gruffly, "if you'll promise to stay on dry ground, I'll try my damn—my darndest to save yore hoss."

She promised. He mounted and rode into the timber, roped a downed log and snaked it back to the bog. He let it fall so that it formed a bridge from the shore to the horse. Then Red gathered lighter poles and brush until he had built a causeway across the bog to the horse.

IT was a tedious and dangerous job. The log served as a sort of bridge but beneath his weight it began to sink. He rammed poles and brush underneath, forming a temporary foundation between the log and the muck as he advanced.

When he reached the pony, the peril increased. He worked against time and mud. It wasn't difficult to drag a girl's slender form from the mire. But a rope, passed around the pony, would either cut through the animal or snap off.

Red worked the dodge employed by punchers on bogged-down cattle. He lay on the end of his quivering bridge of brush and logs, digging out the horse's hind legs. When they were clear of the muck, he tied them to the saddle with his hogging string. Then, while his bridge sank slowly, threatening at any moment to give away, Red dug out the pony's front quarters, passed his lariat noose around the animal's head and behind the shoulders.

He backed to the shore, careful as a cat, his short hair rising on his sun-baked neck when once he slipped and rammed a booted leg into the oily, bubbling slime. The girl stood watching, her red lips parted, her eyes wide and fearful.

Red reached the shore and strode past her. His arms were black to the shoul-

ders with mud, and mud masked his face. He had lost his hat. The sun gleamed on his red thatch.

He topped the gray, tied to the saddle horn the free end of the lariat. There followed a struggle as spurs sank in deeply and the gray clawed and fought for footing. Then the mud released its grim pull of death. The girl's pony slid slowly across the quivering surface, reached the bank and lay there panting and whistling for air.

Red slid down then stumped back on his muddy boots to free the horse and take his loop off its front quarters. The girl tried to aid but her hands trembled. Finally the pony got up and stood shaking like a leaf.

"Ma'am," Red said, "you can mount an' ride in a few minutes. But stay outa bogs. Don't trust to what looks like green grass."

She tried to thank him but couldn't. Only her eyes spoke of gratitude as they studied the rawboned frame, the sinewy length of this cowboy, clad in battered bull-hide chaps, huck shirt and swinging gunbelt, and all topped off with wiry red hair.

"I got to be ridin'," he went on. "There's no danger now. I met up with three men down in the timber, driving cattle. They'll be along right soon." He turned toward his gray, then he paused to ask another question.

"None of my business, but what are you doin', way up here on the roof of the world?"

She smiled faintly. "I'm Jerry Shaw," she explained. "My brother is Tom Shaw, ranger in this district. All rangers are also deputy sheriffs. Tom went out early this morning with Dick Rains to watch the reserve trails. The whole country is watching. It seems there's an outlaw around worth five housand dollars, dead or alive. An outlaw named—"

Red's eyes turned hard and bitter. "So you rode out to help yore brother nab a fat reward?" he broke in.

She shook her yellow curls. "No. I was scouting this old Indian trail."

"What for?"

"With Tom hunting outlaws, Yellowstone Mahone may try to slip cattle into the reserve."

"Why should Mahone do that?"

"It's a dry year. The government cut down Mahone's grazing permit by five hundred head. He swore no ranger could bar him and that somehow he'd put his beef on Uncle Sam's grass. With Tom—and Dick—watching for—" she faltered, eyes dropping away from Brazos Red.

"Say it," he ordered. "Say that you know me.

She nodded. "I know you. Who'd ever mistake that brush of red hair."

He grumbled. "I've often regretted it durin' the past couple of years."

"And that dimple in your cheek?"

He clawed hastily at three days growth of beard on his lean jaws.

"I figured," he muttered, "that my beauty mark was hid."

SHE began to scrape the mud off her blouse. "With Tom and Dick hunting —outlaws," she said, "Mahone will find it easy to drift cattle up this blazed trail. There's only one way of calling for help—"

"Yore gun?" Red asked.

"I dropped that in the mud. But there's a pile of dried wood down country on a high knoll. It's a signal. Smoke by day or fire by night will draw rangers or punchers to the blazed trail. I must reach it before Mahone and his men get their cattle into some canyon where they can hide out for weeks. I'm a ranger's sister."

Red possessed no interest in a ranger who this moment was seeking him. He

had saved the girl and her horse. Let her ride down and touch off the beacon.

She called to him as he led out his gray. "You spoke of men and cattle. Were they below the knoll?"

"A couples of miles. The cattle were tired an' trailin' slow. One of the gents—a hombre in a black hat—was plenty fast, though. He cut down on me with a high-powered rifle."

"That," she said with conviction, "was Yellowstone Mahone. He's the only man in miles who carries that sort of gun."

"I'd figured," said Red, mounted now and ready to strike for the high divide, "that it might be Dick Rains. I met up with some fast gents in town two days back. They drygulched me fer the money in sight. One slapped a slug into my haddle. He acted like an officer."

"Dick Rains," she said, "would give you a chance for yore life."

"How do you know?"

She scooped mud off a slender hand and revealed to Red a diamond ring on a slender finger.

"That's Dick Rains' ring," she explained. "And Dick is a white man or I wouldn't be wearing it."

"He's chasing me."

"That's his duty. He's an officer. So is my brother. No, the man who tried to kill you on sight two days ago is the same rider who is shoving illegal cattle into the national forest—Yellowstone Mahone."

Red swung his gray down the trail. "Ma'am," he said. "I'll side you to that signal peak."

"You've saved my life. I wouldn't ask you for further sacrifice."

Red grinned. "I crave," he answered, "to say a last farewell to Yallerstone Mahone, before I cross the big divide."

"It's your funeral," shrugged Jerry Shaw.

Red led on the back trail. He carried his rifle again across the saddle fork. Jerry followed on her weary bay horse. She wasn't armed. As he broke cover on the clearing below the knoll where the dried wood was piled for signalling, he sighted a gaunt red steer emerging from timber across the park. Here, at the beacon point, he had reached the point of Mahone's herd.

Jerry Shaw turned her pony sharply, drumming with impatient heels on the mount's ribs. Before Red could check her, she had started toward the knoll on a headlong gallop.

"Hey!" Red shouted. It had not been his plan at all to reveal himself boldly to Yellowstone Mahone and his riders. Better to pick his own fighting ground and balance the odds. But the ranger's sister paid no attention as she rode for the signal, galloping up the steep and rocky knoll.

Three horsemen heard the pound of hoofs as the pony ran. They came crashing out of the timber. Mahone, easily marked by his black hat, slashed his horse cross-handed with his quirt as he headed toward Jerry Shaw.

His gun barked. The girl's pony went down and she was flung from the saddle. She struck the ground, lying there, crumpled like a broken doll.

BRAZOS RED forgot caution and the hard wisdom gained in frontier fighting. He came out of the woods on the jump, riding high on his wall-eyed gray, his carbine held breast-high for a quick throw-down.

Heedless of Mahone's men, he aimed his weapon straight toward the cattleman. The carbine cracked. The bullet struck in front of Mahone's horse, turned the lunging animal as it neared Jerry Shaw, where she lay beside her struggling pony.

Swift after the warning bullet, Red followed in. Mahone turned to face him,

his rifle snapping up for a point-blank shot.

Red ducked his head and galloped in. His blazing eyes were centered on Mahone, on the man who would kill without warning, the man who would shoot down a girl.

"You damn skunk!" Red raved. He had forgotten in his red rage the two Mahone riders, until they crashed headlong into his gray. One rider rammed his pony against Red's cayuse, knocked it off balance. The other man slashed at the New Mexican's head with the front sight of his six-gun.

The outlaw's hat turned that blow aside, but it knocked him off his horse. As he pitched forward, half dazed by the gun smash, kicking clear of his stirrups to avoid hanging up, Mahone charged into the dusty, swirling struggle.

Flat on the ground, bucking like a freshly-roped broncho, Red battled against the two men who bestrode him.

One grabbed for Red's carbine that lay nearby, where it had fallen from the outlaw's grip. He rammed the barrel against Red's short ribs.

"He's wuth five thousand, dead or alive!" he panted.

CHAPTER THREE

War Smoke

HIGH on the slope, Jerry Shaw sat up. Her head rang like a gong. She turned and saw her pony nearby, kicking and struggling, for Mahone's bullet had creased its neck, temporarily disabling it. Then Jerry's dazed eyes turned toward the pile of dried wood a few rods up the knoll. If she could light that brush, the smoke would bring help, her ranger brother and her lover, Deputy Dick Rains. They were not far distant, for the main trail through the forest ran just west of this bare divide.

She stood up, a forlorn figure in her muddy attire, a battered boot on one foot, the other clad only in a torn stocking. Mahone was down the hill, keeping tabs on the fight which his men waged with a battling outlaw.

Here was a chance to reach the beacon and set fire to it. As she started up the hill, she heard a hoarse shout. It was Brazos Red's retort to one of Mahone's men, who had rammed a rifle against his body and threatened to convert the outlaw into five thousand dollars worth of cold meat.

"Shoot!" rasped Brazos Red. "Go ahead and shoot, yuh damned skunk, and be damned to yuh!"

Jerry heard and turned instantly. If Mahone put his cattle on forbidden grass it would bring disgrace to her brother. For she knew that range folks, if they discovered Mahone had pastured more than his beef allotment, would ignorantly and perhaps maliciously assert that Tom Shaw had accepted graft money. But the red-haired outlaw had saved her, then risked his own life to side her back into dangerous territory.

Fear lent new strength to Jerry's weary limbs. She rushed down the steep pitch, and saw the gleam of the rifle barrel, the muzzle held against Red's ribs. She screamed, a cry that echoed back from grim granite rims.

Yellowstone Mahone heard her. He whirled on his boot heels. He was amazed to see the girl on her feet, apparently with her strength and wits recovered. Mahone was a crafty man. Instantly he swooped and knocked away the rifle barrel as his follower pulled the trigger. The bullet intended for Red whistled across the outlaw's heaving chest, missing by a bare inch.

Jerry reached the rifleman, seized the rifle, attempted to wrest it away from the

cursing man. "You can't kill him!" she cried. "You can't—"

"He's wuth five thousand—" the man retorted. "Five thousand—"

His eyes gleamed. His mate, whose right eye was rapidly swelling where Red's fist had connected, rasped for him to go ahead and finish the job.

It was Mahone who interfered—and for his own greedy purpose. This girl would serve as a pawn in the conflict between himself and the federal officers. She was Tom Shaw's sister.

Roughly he flung Jerry aside. But as she stumbled backwards, Mahone ripped out a six-gun and covered his own man.

"Lay down that gun," he growled. "I'm boss here. Don't fergit our main job is to put five hundred beef on Uncle Sam's grass."

The rifleman—a stocky, heavy-shouldered specimen with coarse black whiskers masking his bulldog jaw—lowered his weapon but glared at Mahone's lined six-gun.

"Always thinkin' of yore own interests," he snarled. "Yuh pay me an' Snapper forty a month an' board. We got a show here to make five thousand in easy cash. But yuh try to keep us from collectin'. Mebbe it's because yo're sweet on the gal." He leered. "Yuh fergit she's Dick Rains' honey."

Mahone swarthy face was stern and rigid under the shadow of his bullet-marked hat. He said shortly: "I'm not sweet on the gal. Rains can have her—but only if she plays our game today."

Jerry Shaw heard. She rose from the ground where Mahone's rude strength had hurled her. She brushed off her garments, even attempted to bind up her yellow curls. She was cool now; not the frightened, screaming girl who had rushed to save the outlaw.

"What game," she asked calmly, "would you like to play?"

Mahone stepped back carefully from the man who gripped the rifle. He did that so his swinging Colt would also cover Snapper, the Mahone puncher, who sat astride Brazos Red.

Mahone was well aware that the hope of gaining five thousand dollars had dulled the fine edge of his men's loyalty. Willingly he would have promised them their full share in the reward, for he needed their help to place his cattle on summer feed. Those cattle were worth far more to Mahone than the blood money on Brazos Red

But Snapper and the rifleman were of the same stamp as Mahone—bullies and crooks, not honest riders The boss had never trusted them out of his sight Just now he had drawn a gun on them. So, Mahone knew well that words he spoke would pass for nothing. They would heed neither commands nor promises. If he won out today, he must win by superior force and cunning.

The girl was the pawn. And like most crooks, Mahone knew that he could trust an honest human like Jerry Shaw.

MAHONE turned to the girl. "The game is this," he answered bruskly. "I intend to move my cattle to government grass. You know what I'm doing. You came here to set fire to the signal, call on Tom and Dick for help. You didn't make it. You had a chance but you came back to save this red-headed killer."

"I came back," she said calmly, "because today he risked his life to save me. And then he capped it off by taking the same chance for the pony you just creased through the neck."

"If you want to save this Brazos gent from a bullet, then promise you won't set fire to the signal. And give yore word that after we get our herd straightened

out and over the trail, you'll never tell yore brother that you saw us pass."

"You know," she said, "that if you raid government grass and other folks find it out—others whose herds have been cut like yours—they'll accuse my brother of grafting. He may lose his job, be disgraced, perhaps go to prison."

"I know that," said Mahone, "but a man with five hundred cattle that need grass doesn't care. I've outlined the deal. To hell with yore ranger brother! It's up to you."

Jerry Shaw looked at Red. He lay on the ground. He had quit struggling, for the battle had taken a turn where mere blows wouldn't count. Two armed men stood over him. Another sat on him. Red awaited a turn in his luck.

He looked up at Jerry Shaw, grinned, and drawled "Ma'am excuse my language, but tell that lean black snake to go plumb to hell!"

Jerry Shaw's eyes softened. She faced Yellowstone Mahone, looking him over as one would examine a curious sort of serpent. Mahone was something of a human snake, long and limber of build, dark and lean of face, black and beady of eye.

"I promise what you ask," said Jerry Shaw. "Then she pointed to Red. Now let him go free."

Mahone laughed and motioned to Snapper. "Git off him," he ordered.

Snapper arose, growling, his sidelong glance on his tall chief. Brazos Red arose, shrugged his shoulders, brushed off his garments. He was cool-nerved now. Jerry Shaw might believe that her promise to Mahone meant freedom for an outlaw, but Red didn't believe it.

He saw his own six-gun rammed down behind Mahone's waistband. The cattleman had picked it up off the ground. Red had lost it during the fight.

Snapper carried a six-gun. His friend of the bulldog jaw still held Red's carbine. Mahone's high-powered rifle had been laid against a rock.

So the peaks looked down on the four; the slim, calm girl, the defiant outlaw, the two grass rustlers, furtive and distrustful of their boss, and the dark Mahone, worried about his next play.

RED spoke suddenly. "In all the excitement, Mahone, we musta scairt yore cattle."

Yellowstone looked startled. His glance swept the trail where it emerged from timber. Alarmed by the gunfire, the herd leaders had turned back. Five hundred cattle were going down the mountain in a panic.

Mahone cursed. This required hurried riding and speed. Seachers for Red might also have heard the crash of guns on the divide.

He snapped to his men. "Let's tie 'em up. Ride an' swing back the herd."

Snapper growled, his hand not far from his gun hilt, his eyes sharp on Mahone's poised Colt.

"Not by a dang sight! We got five thousand bucks in sight. If it hadn't been fer you, we'd have him cold, but the gal turned yuh soft. We're not quittin' Brazos Red—not unless we can put a bullet through him fust."

But Mahone wouldn't allow that. If they killed Red, then the girl would speak up. Nor could he silence her. For any harm done would reveal to the law his invasion of the federal reserve.

"All right," said Mahone. "One of you ride with me. The other stays here on guard."

Neither Snapper nor his heavy-jowled mate wished to quit Brazos Red. They were blood-money loco. But Mahone began promising them bigger money in beef and a share in the fall profits.

"We'll toss to see who goes," growled Snapper.

A coin was spun. Snapper won. He stayed on guard over Red. The horses were rounded up. Among the bunch was Red's gray. That was a horse trained to stand under gunfire and to not quit its master.

It stood quietly enough while Snapper flung its hackamore rope over the twisted limb of a jack-pine. Jerry's pony, weak in the knees, lurched up, walked to its mates for comfort.

Mahone and his puncher mounted, and raced down into the timber, hot on the trail of fleeing cattle.

Mahone's high-powered rifle leaned against the rock. Mahone, anxious to turn his herd, had not taken time to shove it into his saddle boot.

Red sat on a boulder, and his careless glance passed over the rifle.

Snapper, a lanky rider with dingy yellow hair and mustache, and pale gray eyes under scant brows, stood between the outlaw and Mahone's gun. Snapper had drawn his Colt. He guarded Red as though the outlaw were a mint—which he certainly was to Snapper, who never in his life had expected to share in such a rich reward as five thousand round dollars.

Mahone and his other man disappeared into the timber. The mountains became silent. Red sat on his rock rolling a smoke. That was permitted because he had been searched and even his pocket-knife taken away.

Jerry walked over and began to pet her injured pony. Snapper paid little attention to the girl. The signal beacon wasn't far off. But like Mahone, he believed the girl would be good as her word.

Brazos Red had made no promises. He was well aware that if Mahone or his men killed him, they would be classed as heroes. Life was sweet to Red, but to keep on breathing, he must somehow make a break before Mahone returned with the herd. The high-powered rifle, so near, but yet so far, with a keen-eyed gunman standing between it and Red, represented the way out.

Red began a drawling conversation. Snapper, surly at first, became interested. For Red was detailing incidents of his outlaw career, and this cheap crook would listen and later boast of his knowledge of a noted killer's life.

Jerry Shaw heard the turn of the talk. She stood stock-still by her pony, keen-witted enough to understand Red's game. Snapper settled down on his haunches but his six-gun was ready for a quick throw-down. He was six feet away from Brazos Red.

"You know," Red drawled "I wouldn't be wuth five thousand dollars if a pal hadn't threw me down."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Never trust a friend—not if you're playin' deep. The law would never have known I got my man if a friend hadn't turned me in. There was money in it. So he went for it."

Snapper's pale eyes blinked. He was thinking now of Mahone and the other puncher. They claimed to be his friends. But down in the timber they might be plotting as they rode.

Then Jerry Shaw entered this game of beguiling Snapper.

"How easy," she said lightly, "for Mahone and his man to kill both you and Red. Then they could split the five thousand dollars. More for two than three."

Snapper swore and fingered his Colt. "They wouldn't try that," he growled. But his voice was unsteady.

The man's mind was now on his own danger. He eyed the black timber. It wasn't far away. A rifle bullet could drive from it, snap through his back as he sat guarding the outlaw. Mahone

hadn't taken his rifle but his puncher carried Red's carbine.

Red sat there, easy in appearance, but he had tensed his muscles. He was willing to wager all on one big play.

"More money for two than three," he drawled taking his cue from Jerry Shaw, "if they should shoot from that timber."

He gestured. Just for an instant, Snapper's uneasy eyes turned away. That was Red's big chance. He took it.

He uncoiled his sinewy body in one long lunge toward Snapper.

Snapper, a fast man, flung up his six-gun. But Red, sliding through the dust, knocked up the barrel as the heavy weapon roared. The bullet cut through the flaring slack of his shirt.

Jerry Shaw, white-lipped, rushed toward the high-powered rifle. She felt certain that Red would die before she could reach it, but in that case, it would defend her from Snapper's attack.

Red's right arm came down from the gun-barrel as Snapper, reeling backward, thumbed the hammer for a second bullet drive. Red's thumb drove in between hammer and cartridge head. The two men, locked in bitter struggle, crashed to the ground.

Snapper jerked his gun away from Red's grip. He drove the barrel against Red's chest as the outlaw wrestled with him.

Jerry Shaw reached Mahone's rifle. She seized it by the barrel, struck once at Snapper's head, and the polished stock broke off as Snapper went limp as a heap of rags.

Red stood up, badly shaken, pasty-faced under his tan. That first bullet had been a near one. His thumb was bleeding where the gun hammer had stabbed it.

With his left hand he took the six-gun away from Snapper. "Thanks, ma'am," he said to Jerry Shaw. "I'll be goin' now."

"Over the divide?" she asked. Then. "Well—I don't blame you."

Red grinned. "The divide," he said, "can wait. I'm goin' up to set fire to that bunch of wood!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Tallied for the Noose!

JERRY SHAW stood over the sprawled out Snapper, the broken rifle gripped in her hands. Her eyes were on the red-haired outlaw. She saw the quizzical grin on his scratched and mauled face. Well she knew that when he lit the signal fire, he would draw officers of the law to this spot, men sworn to capture him and send him to New Mexico, where he would likely stretch hemp.

Then Jerry looked toward the dark timber that was her brother's charge. If Mahone succeeded in his plan of drifting cattle to forbidden grass, then her brother would suffer disgrace. She could light that fire and bid Red hit the trail to the high divide—but she had given her word to Mahone.

"Ma'am," drawled Red, "I can jest about figure what yo're thinkin'. You made a promise."

She drooped her head and echoed miserably, "I made a promise."

Red grinned. "But Mahone wouldn't ask an outlaw like me to make one. So —I'm a free agent. I'll touch things off."

"You'll bring the law on the gallop. West of the divide, the main trail runs up a deep valley. There's another point across country. If they spot our smoke, they'll touch off a return signal. It'll mean they're coming. They should climb the ridge within a half hour."

"We'll hope," Red drawled, as he touched spur to his gray, "that they see our war smoke. Fer I expect Mahone will be back sooner than the half hour."

As he rode away, Jerry Shaw ran after, seized his stirrup. "Red," she

breathed, "you mustn't light that fire! You've saved my life—even risked that bog to save a fifty dollar pony."

"A dang good hoss, at that!"

"You've done your share. You came back down the trail with me—"

"If it hadn't been fer you, Miss Jerry, I'd likely be cold meat now."

Red's back was turned on Snapper. He judged Snapper was out of the fight for a long time, but Snapper possessed a head as hard and tough as a turtle.

He stirred, clawed at the ground, then sat up and turned his bleary eyes on the mounted outlaw, the girl afoot going up the hill.

The gray was halfway up the knoll, when something stirred down in the dark timber. A crash, then silence.

Red knew the sound. A careless cow critter, wandering from the trail, had stepped on a dead bit of wood. He had heard that warning earlier in the day.

Red swooped down and brushed away Jerry's restraining hand. "Hit the grit!" he snapped shortly. "Mahone's comin'."

He rolled his spurs. The gray snorted, sprang ahead. The pile of dried wood loomed above. Red leaned over the saddle horn. It was seldom that he raked his mount with a shot-loaded quirt. But he used the whip now.

Jerry Shaw, stumbling as Red shot his horse forward, sank to her knees. She saw Snapper scramble up, scuttle toward a pile of boulders that offered shelter.

"Red!" she screamed. "He's alive!"

Red heard her cry but there was not time to turn back. He glanced toward the timber as the gray clawed up the last rod of rocky ground.

Cattle were emerging. Foam trailed from their red mouths. They had been driven fast and hard. Mahone and his puncher of the bulldog jaw were not far behind that lead.

RED reined in by the dried wood, sprang down. A match ripped along his overalls. He thrust the flickering flame into a heap of pine needles.

A rifle cracked from the timber. A bullet buzzed off the rock monument that loomed above the fire.

Red jerked back startled. The match went out.

He saw Mahone and his men quirt their ponies from the timber. They headed straight up the slope, firing as they came.

Red grinned and struck a second match. His hand was steady now.

"If you figure I've played a square game," he muttered, and it was a prayer, "let this second match go out. For between you an' me, it's the last match I got."

Mahone came on, slashing his panting pony under the body.

His follower quit the saddle, knelt with steady barrel lined on Brazos Red whose sinewy frame was boldly outlined against the western sky.

The rifle cracked. Red fell forward as the bullet cut through his right shoulder.

Jerry Shaw screamed, rushed out to halt Mahone as he thundered past. A flying front foot struck her a glancing blow as Mahone's wall-eyed horse swerved and shied. She fell flat, weeping and unstrung. But Brazos Red lurched up even though his right arm had crumpled under him.

The match had fallen from suddenly nerveless fingers. It had dropped into the pine needle tinder. A tiny flame caught, threatened to flicker out as a sudden gust of wind swept the high point.

With his wounded body, Red sheltered it, careless of the charge of Yellowstone Mahone.

Believing Red was out of the fight, killed or wounded, Mahone stamped in furiously to kick out the fire that had now wreathed the beacon. There was time

enough to prevent the signal for help.

Red's senses were failing. The big high country, the timber, the rocks, the peaks of the Broken Horn, danced wildly before his fading eye-sight but he heard the thud of Mahone's boots.

As Mahone leaped across his sprawling body, intent on kicking out the blaze, Red flung up his left hand, and grabbed Mahone around the ankle. He couldn't throw Mahone. But he startled the cattleman. Hissing like a disturbed rattler, Mahone whirled away. He swung to look down on Brazos Red, and his gun hand flashed downward with smoking Colt gripped for a killing shot.

Propped up on his left elbow, with barely enough strength remaining to balance his Colt, Red fired first. His bullet hit Mahone between the eyes.

High into the blue high country sky rolled the war smoke signal.

JERRY SHAW saw it, as did Snapper and the puncher with the rifle. Jerry leaped up, stumbled toward the blazing beacon where Brazos Red sprawled alongside the twitching body of Mahone.

Down on the flank of the timber, bellowing cattle were massed in a panic. Once again they had turned and stampeded down the mountain.

Jerry reached Brazos Red. Tenderly enough, she pillowed his head on her knees, pleaded with him to open his eyes.

Red, always polite, obeyed. "Ma'am" he said hazily "I—I hope I didn't ruin Mahone's hat with another bullet hole. I lost mine. I'll need that lid—"

The girl was weeping. She heard the loud curses of Snapper and his mate as they mounted the knoll, intent on their revenge.

"They're coming to get us," she sobbed, "after we've tried so hard—"

That plea penetrated through the red haze of pain that enveloped him. He had been schooled to stand and fight when his body reeled from agony.

Red lurched up, an infinitely slow movement of his long, lean body. His face was drawn into hard knots.

He stiffened to meet the charge of Snapper and the human bulldog as they rushed in to kick him to bloody ribbons. After that would come revenge on a deputy sheriff's girl, a girl who had knocked out Snapper with Mahone's rifle.

Red's Colt thundered. The long barrel jerked upward, then down. Twice it crashed. The first bullet knocked Snapper ten feet down the hill.

Red's second bullet missed Bulldog, who leaped as the outlaw fired on Snapper. Then, with a yell, the man sprang forward with rifle poised to crack open Red's skull.

Jerry Shaw, weeping, half beyond her wits, had sprung up, danced away from the side of Red. She gripped what remained of Mahone's rifle. She struck now, and a savage blow it was that dented Bulldog's hard head. He went to his knees, then fell flat on his face.

Jerry turned, the tears streaming down her face and washing away what remained of bog mud. What she saw across the big valley restored her smile. There arose the answering signal smoke. Help was on the way. . . .

A HALF hour later, Tom Shaw and Dick Rains stood up, and Dick said to the trembling girl:

"We've strapped up his arm. A couple weeks for it to knit and he'll be good as ever. That is—if a dang outlaw is *ever* any good."

"I suppose," Jerry said in a small voice, "that now you'll take him back to jail? Send him to New Mexico?

Brazos Red, gritting his teeth against the pain of a recently set arm, grinned.

(Continued on page 158)

Wildling Rebel

By Barry Scobee
(Author of "The Salt Lick Ambush," etc.)

A Grulla Colt Story

Smoky, the wild grulla stallion, might be able to pit his smooth strength and cunning against the wily traps of man, but what chance had he to defy the sway of the wild herd's king, who carried death in each crashing hoof?

THE THREE-YEAR-OLD grulla stallion pawed the ground, threw up his head and neighed, half in restless impatience, half in challenging anger. For days he had been in banishment on the outskirts of the wild horse bunch, sent there by the old herd stallion. And all the time instincts as old as the ages were hammering in his veins for him to acquire a harem of his own.

His neigh was answered by a graceful bay filly with a mellow, soft-timbred musical note as clear as the tone of an army bugle. It set his blood on fire. But instantly the old black herd leader, blaring wrath and warning, was racing to the danger point.

As Old Blackie passed the filly he struck her a dragging blow with his yellow teeth. Then, big-framed and bony and battle-scarred, he came plunging straight on for the young crane-colored three-year-old, squalling his vicious fury.

Smoky stood his ground, shrilling defiance. He even danced forward a few steps, as if to meet his enemy half way. Then he faltered, stopped. He had been shouldered aside, bitten and abused too many times by herd stallions. The lessons of self-effacement and respect were

still too strong within him, and with Old Blackie within three lengths of him he turned and fled. . . .

Smoky topped a rise of ground and in a pretense of airy indifference scanned the vast and empty Southwestern rangeland. But he had been chased away from the herd once more and was feeling it keenly.

Overwhelmed with loneliness he flung back a long broken neigh that ended oddly on a note of defiance. Then his roving, hoping eyes caught a movement far off across the rolling grassland, so far and slight that human vision could never have picked it out of the emptiness.

Horses!

Smoky knew. To him the movements were different from the movements of cattle or antelope. And these horses might be an unattached bunch of mares. Tossing his head and leaping with the hope and abandonment of youth he went racing for that distant point.

Smoky's curiosity was equal to a mule's. He caught a movement beside a stool of blackbrush and promptly forgot the harem. He stopped and went peering, nose lowered. A rattlesnake buzzed, just striking distance away. Smoky leaped back and went galloping on—until he saw a coyote trotting through a swale. He hated wolves. He had fought with them, and chased them many times. He veered and went after the lone roamer.

At first the wolf merely tried to avoid the horse by loping off to one side, but when he saw that he was pursued he began to stretch himself. After a pair of miles, with Smoky crowding the old dog, they plunged to the summit of a low ridge. But what Smoky saw there made him forget the wolf and bounce stiff-legged to a halt, to stare and sniff.

Two or three miles away, in a wide valley dotted with cottonwood trees, was a spread of ranch buildings. Smoky knew ranches. He had made raids on several in his three adventuresome years.

Emotions stirred in him. Fear, for one thing. Ranches might mean men. And men meant danger. But ranches might also mean salt and water and fragrant rich feed in sacks. His system was calling for salt. He hadn't licked a block of the white stuff for weeks. His mouth watered, his tongue laved his teeth with salty desire. He forgot the wolf and lifted into a bouncing lope straight for the buildings and fences.

Far beyond the ranch huddle he could see the horse bunch again. Only now he saw that the horses were ridden by men. They were coming toward the ranch. Smoky's horse wisdom told him that he could get there and away before they did, and his thirst and salt-hunger urged him to make a try for a gulp or two of water and a lick or two at a salt block. . . .

A quarter of a mile from the ranch he slowed down and approached cautiously, ready to turn and pound away should he detect the presence of men, or even one man. The smell of men-things became strong in his tender, spreading nostrils, but by then he had made out some worn lumps of block salt around a series of feed troughs. There being no movements at all among the corral pens and buildings, he allowed the urge for salt to coax him on.

As he licked hungrily at the salt his cautious, searching nostrils and ears caught the sound and smell of water in the pens, and the fragrance of hay and luscious grain.

He moved on toward a gate which was swaying open on its silent hinges in a mild breeze.

SMOKY'S experience had taught him where to find feed—in barns and sheds. When he had drunk his fill of cool, clear water from a trough that was lapping over in the breeze, he jumped over

two low gates with graceful ease and peered into the duskiness of an open door.

Sunlight was peeping through cracks, giving the duskiness a warm glow. The smells were tantalizing. He made out a pile of fat sacks and eased forward, as taut as a marauding cat. He pawed at the sacks. A long gash appeared in one of them, and grain spilled out.

Twice in the next few minutes Smoky, chewing hungrily, returned to the door to look out. There was not a sound at the one-story ranch house, nor sight of riders in the range that his vision took in. After a longer interval he went to look a third time. Then he forgot danger in the soothing stupor of a belling filling with rich food.

The first warning was men talking. Guiltily Smoky leaped to the door. Five men on horses were riding in at the gate where he had first entered. A sixth man was on the ground. This man closed the gate with a rattle of chain. Then Smoky saw that the men had a captive, and he stared with unbelieving eyes.

For the captive was a two-year-old filly, a grulla like himself—crane-colored body running to black at the tips of the ears and toward the hoofs, with faint zebra-like stripes where the forelegs swelled into shoulders. And black mane and tail.

The filly was held with ropes dallied around saddle-horns. All the horses were sweaty and weary from the task of bringing her in. She was moist with sweat, lathery where the ropes had rubbed, and so weary that she braced her legs to stand. And she was scared. Terror was in her red, wide-spreading nostrils as she breathed in the strange smells, and terror was in her scanning eyes.

"Go fetch a saddle, Westy," directed an authoritative voice. "We'll give her a little inter-duction ride while she's too give out to buck much."

"Yeh, and I'm gonna be the ranny that rides. She's gonna be mine."

"Yours? How do you get that way? What do you think I've took time to go capture her for?"

"I don't know, Sissorbill, but you al'ays try to grab the top of everything, just because you're the straw-boss around here."

"She's done grabbed. Hell, she's the spittin' image of that wild grulla stud that's running with the wild bunch down in the brushy hills to the south'ard. I wouldn't take forty bucks for her as she stands. And her and that stud together'd be worth two hundred——"

"You're talkin' through the holes in your hat—three hundred has already been posted for that three-year-old grulla."

"Says you."

"Says that feller I win three dollars from in a poker game down at Windtown last week. He says he seen it in the paper."

"The two of 'em broke to ride oughta be worth five hundred then. Go get a saddle—mine."

Grumbling, Westy came through the two low gates that Smoky had curved over. Westy was short and bow-legged, and noisy in his flapping chaps. Smoky backed away from the door and stood ready to leap at the man when he entered, and knock him tumbling.

Smoky liked to lunge into men, scatter them, knock them into the dust, send them scrambling up fences. He had learned that men on the ground were not to be feared. That they were dangerous only when on horses, with ropes and sticks that made sharp thunder and killed horses. This man had no such stick.

Smoky's neck stretched out. His head dropped snakily, nearly to the ground. His breath slid from his nostrils in a long soft hiss of waiting savagery. His eyes were as blankly eager as a panther's ready to spring to the kill.

But Westy did not come in at the door. He veered, and was out of sight a mom-

ent. When he reappeared he was lugging a saddle against his leg, and a bridle in the other hand.

Westy passed through the first gate, leaving it wide behind him. An open gate was always a temptation to Smoky. Now it offered escape, or a chance to fight for the filly—and with the age-old instinct of a stallion to protect the female of the species, half of Smoky's mind was on the filly.

Smoky went cat-stepping out through the door and under the shed. He took the open gate with the stealth of a puma. One of the men in the pen beyond, still up in the saddle, saw him, and cried out hoarsely:

"God sake, Wes, look behind yuh!"

STARTLED, the short thick cowboy craned around. Half a glance was enough—too much. With a throaty *gawp* he let go of the saddle and bridle.

His flight was quicker than the eye. The next seen of him he was rolling across the top pole of the nearest fence. Smoky got there in time to nose him on over to the ground beyond, where he landed with a leathery plop.

"It's the grulla stud!" yipped Sissorbill incredulously.

"He pinched me!" wailed Westy in outrage. "He pinched my leg with his teeth."

"Look at him! Look at her!" Sissorbill was gibbering greedily. "Matched all same as two dollars. They'll bring six hundred bucks from some rodeo outfit. That'll make me a thousand and fourteen in the bank."

"He's mine!" Westy shrilled. "He bit my laig!"

"I hope he bites it clean off."

"He's mine, I tell you!" Westy insisted. "I seen him first, after Tomato."

"All you seen," said Sissorbill coldly, "was a fence to hide behind."

Smoky trotted back to the saddle that Westy had dropped. He sniffed it. He shook his head at the sweaty man-smell, his mane all bushed up. He pivoted his body around, set his heels close to the thing, and let fly. The saddle hit the pole fence with a rattle of stirrups.

"Quit that!" yelped Sissorbill. "Don't you bust that expensive hull."

He was off his horse in one jump. He went bellying across the gate. It was a posture that let the seat of his pants shine at the sun. With a squeal of joy Smoky leaped for it. He seized a mouthful of slack and dangled Sissorbill into the pen, to drop him all spread out on his stomach.

Smoky pivoted again. Squatted to kick. Sissorbill rolled, twisted to his feet, and sailed over the gate like a buck deer.

"Haw-haw-haw!" guffawed Westy. "Go to the house and crawl under the bed."

"Get that stud!" Sissorbill shouted to the four grinning men still on their horses. "Let that filly loose. Ripple your ropes off. You, Lard, your loop's on top."

A fat man began to shake his rope loose. The filly plunged and squalled in fresh excitement. Smoky did a war dance at the gate, with half a mind to jump over and slam into the four men so obviously mistreating the little grulla.

Then Lard's rope hopped off her head, and the loop of the red-faced man, being yelled at as Tomato, hooped from around her body and dropped to the ground.

Smoky stepped back, waiting. Coolly he lifted his head and spread a look around, sizing up the pens and the adjacent landscape for any additional danger. And he saw it—a little knot of horses two or three miles away, half behind a ridge. That might be Old Blackie and his troop.

Then all at once the filly was free. She seemed astonished. She shook herself violently to get off the feel of the ropes. She stepped to the gate with a little whim-

per of inquiry like a plea and touched noses with Smoky.

"Look't 'em kiss!" said Westy, with a fond note in his tone. "I'm gonna name her Grulletta."

Grulletta tossed her head coquettishly, and gazed away from Smoky in a pretense of indifference. For a moment both horses had forgotten the men. Smoky, not to be outdone by feminine wiles, turned away from her a little and gazed off at the half-hidden bunch of horses.

Smoky's nostrils spread in a loud and calling neigh rich with challenge and inquiry and lonesomeness. Grulletta looked at him in hurt surprise and whimpered again. At that plea Smoky touched her neck with his muzzle and pawed at the gate.

The men laughed, and Sissorbill sailed in again with his hard tones.

"Get your ropes on him! That may be a wild bunch over there. He'll make for 'em, if he gets a chance."

THE men began to weave their ropes into loops to throw. Smoky savvied that. Westy slapped at Smoky with his big hat, to drive him back so that the gate could be opened.

Smoky fluffed up and bit at Westy. He tried to reach the short cowboy across the boards. Then Westy added shouting to his slapping.

Smoky bunched his strong young body against the gate and bulged. The light boards gave way in a splintering tear and the gate was a shreddy wreck, with Smoky's neck stretching for Westy.

"My Gawd!" Westy cried, and twisted behind one of the riding horses.

Smoky, going after Wes, struck the horse and knocked him staggering. The mêlée was on now, in a rising cloud of dust.

Smoky hated geldings. He bit one. Lunged at another. Kicked at a third. The geldings were dancing and squealing in a frenzy of panic. Smoky reared and struck at a rider with his forehoofs. He missed, but one hoof raked a gelding's rump.

A loop ringed a circle in the air. Smoky saw it and ducked his head. The loop caught the long-nosed, dodging Sissorbill, and he was jerked headlong. Smoky lashed at him with his heels as he avoided another rope.

"Leggo! Leggo that rope, you fool!" Sissorbill bawled. "You're dragging me!"

Smoky, a whirlwind of action, ran against the taut rope, plowed against it. The rope burned his breast, dragged Sissorbill up under his feet, slung Sissorbill against the fence.

A loop lashed around Smoky's neck, tightened. Smoky plunged his weight on it. The line, dallied to a saddle-horn, snapped in two. The saddle end snapped back into Tomato's red face.

"Ow-wagh!" Tomato blubbered thickly. "It broge my teeth—buthted my plate."

He spat out teeth and gutta-percha gums.

"He's a killer horse!" men shouted. "Rope him 'fore he hurts somebody!"

Smoky popped out of the bedlam and leaped for the gate where he had entered the corral. But that gate was closed now. And it was high and stout. Besides the filly was not there. Smoky dashed about looking for her, and for a place to get out.

The three-year-old crane-colored stallion had been in tight places before. He had learned the lesson that if he kept on going he would escape after a while. He saw Grulletta beyond the middle pen, back by the shed.

He went through the two light gates and joined her. He nipped at her ribs to get her into action and rushed her toward a gate that opened on the side of the pen toward the ranch house. But she didn't

know gates, and wouldn't make a try at crashing it.

Then five yowling men were at them again—five, because Westy was back in his saddle. And Sissorbill with a bloody nose was up on a fence giving directions.

"Rope him! Rope him! Heel the damn goat! Throw him down and bust his nose!"

Smoky flew into the thicket of men. Jarred them right and left. His swinging head struck a rider and knocked him from the saddle. Then he was through them, and Grulletta was ahead, racing through the pens.

Smoky, in the outer pen, did not try for the stout gate that would let him onto the open range. Instead he leaped for the pole fence.

The fence was high. Too high for him to go over. He crashed across it with his breast. Poles cracked and gave under his weight.

"Git him! Git him 'fore he gits over!"

A rope struck his nose, slid over his muzzle and leaped back to tighten around his neck. Then, squirming and twisting, he was hauled backward from the fence.

But he had broken enough rails to lower the fence. It was about Grulletta's size now. He turned on her, disregarding the rope around his neck. He bit at her rump, leaping from side to side to keep her from dodging back, and drove her to the broken gap. He made her face it.

All this time he had been dragging at the rope around his throat. It was shutting off his wind. His breath was rasping hoarsely. Other ropes were darting at his ever moving body. But he was a wild stallion and he had his first member of a harem. He knew men, too. There was no giving up in him.

He went after the filly mercilessly. At last she took the fence, going over with but little drag.

With Grulletta free, Smoky raised to take the gap himself. But he raised against that choking, holding rope. It jerked him completely backward and he landed with a terrific thud on the ground. He was up instantly.

He leaped for the horse that was holding him. The gelding squealed and fought backward into the other horsemen. Then Smoky saw a clear and open way for the broken fence. Once more he raced and leaped for it.

The slack came out of the rope in his mid-leap. But this time Smoky's whole running weight was on it. His flying bulk could not be jerked back. Yet something had to give. It was the saddle girth. With the crack of a shot it snapped, and the saddle leaped from under the rider and sailed after Smoky, to bang down on his back as he landed outside the pen.

THE six men delayed a little, getting straightened out. Sissorbill had to get his old dry and ragged saddle off and get on his new saddle that Smoky had kicked against the fence.

"Me," said Sissorbill, "I want something that'll hold when I get my loop on that damn stud."

"Yeh," moaned Westy, "your girt would of busted too, with that flyin' grulla on the end o' the rope." He gazed heartbrokenly after his good saddle that was bounding after Smoky out there on the range. "Who'll gimme a thin dime for it? . . . Sixty dollars dragged to hellaluja."

He went limping to the shed to look for another hull.

Old Blackie, who had ranged far and wide for ten years at the head of a band that was sometimes large and sometimes small, depending on the season, on how much the herds had been hunted by men and on the superiority of other stallions, was range-wise and man-wise—and old from a hard life. And yet, because he had been fit, he had survived far longer than the average wild leader.

Blackie was in the lead as he mounted out of a little valley to the slope of a grassy ridge and peeped over for a survey ahead, to discover a ranch spread off there. He did not at once start his herd to galloping away. For one thing they were miles from known water, and they were thirsty. For another, the salt urge was in their blood, and salt was to be found around ranches. As he stood and watched, mares and colts, fillies and young males ranged up alongside of him and looked over the ridge-back.

The far-seeing horse eyes made out movements in the ranch pens—men and horses. And presently they saw a horse, then another, break over a fence and come tearing into the open country. The rear horse was pursued by some strange thing that leaped after him like a bounding panther.

After watching this for a minute in sharp curiosity the herd stirred uneasily, and Blackie, moved by his instinctive fears, began moving them off in a direction of safety. They moved back across the valley. But on the next slope they drifted to a stop to look back with wide-eyed, waiting curiosity. . . .

At first Smoky was terrified by the pursuing, leaping saddle and by the rope that so relentlessly hooped his neck. The loop interfered with his breathing, and the saddle sometimes leaped against him, frightening him more than it hurt. Two miles from the ranch the drag slowed his pace, and in sudden resentment he turned on the saddle, leaping on it with all four hoofs, mauling it, kicking it.

When it seemed he must have the thing slain and helpless he started on, sending a little whinny of appreciation on to Grulletta, who had stopped to wait for him. But the saddle stirred at once and was following him again, pulling and tugging at the rope with the same persistence.

But Smoky would no longer run. He knew that he could whip the saddle whenever he chose. He only trotted. The skittish filly, still nervously afraid, kept well ahead. Presently she passed over a grassy ridge and was out of sight until Smoky gained the same height. Then he saw her trotting across a little valley toward the wild herd on the other slope. He saw Old Blackie arch his tail and come trotting forward to greet her.

Smoky blared a warning. The filly was his, by right of discovery, by right of his defending her against men. With a courage and a development that he had not possessed three hours before, he blared again and picked up into a gallop.

Smoky had turned the corner into horsehood, ready to battle to the death for his harem.

SISSORBILL, Westy, Tomato, Lard and the two other cowboys witnessed Smoky's attack on the saddle. Westy groaned in despair.

"Why does it always have to happen to me?" he wondered aloud.

"And me," said Tomato, touching finger tips to bruised lips. "Plate busted—no more steaks till I pay the dentist some more ransom."

"And me too," put in Sissorbill, fingering his bloody nose tenderly.

"Anybody that af-affects a nose as long as your'n," Westy allowed, "oughta get it busted—er anyhow cracked."

"Them two grullas is going to pay for their mischief," Sissorbill asserted.

"They sure are," agreed Westy. "We're going in cahoots on 'em, at least, Sissorbill, to pay me for that saddle. We go in cahoots, er I take the stud."

They broke from a trot into a lope. They gained on Smoky. When the grulla passed over a low ridge and out of sight they spurred their weary mounts into a faster pace.

"Don't want to let 'em get out of sight

too long," Sissorbill said uneasily. "They can give you the slip like wild cows."

"Not when they're dragging a saddle—the ruins of a saddle."

Westy pushed ahead, anxiety and sorrow making his round face sad to look at. As his vision cleared the line of the ridge he pulled up sharply, raising his right hand in signal to the others.

"Good gosh amighty," he breathed, "all the wild horses in the Southwest is over there!"

The men came into line cautiously, craning their necks. Stopped.

"By ganny," said Lard, "I see that speckled old hen that disappeared from the X Ranch two years ago. What we thought a panther had got and weeped for. Durned fool, lettin' a wild stud toll her off, at her age."

"Yeah, and there's the grulla filly. Standin' down this way, see? Lookin' at something we don't see."

The line of six horsemen nudged their horses up a little higher, until twelve eyes could see over the ridge and into the valley.

"Looky!" Westy whispered.

AT first, Old Blackie was afraid of the saddle Smoky was dragging behind. He circled, snorting and sniffing.

Smoky was on the aggressive. He mouthed and bickered, and kept facing his erstwhile master and enemy, edging in, trying to overtake his dancing, retreating opponent.

Now at last Blackie sensed that the saddle-thing following the young male would not hurt him—it was after Smoky. It was Smoky's problem. And with that conviction Blackie sailed in.

Blackie meant to annihilate the young upstart at once. He reared high, to pound down across Smoky's spine in a back-breaking blow with his great forehoofs. But Smoky, rearing too, twisted aside and let the hoofs strike thunderously on the ground. At the same time he wheeled and, with his heels, struck Blackie terrifically across the gaunt ribs.

With a squall of fury Blackie reared again, throwing his entire great weight at the grulla. Smoky, jumping out of the way, jerked the broken and shapeless saddle against Blackie's rear hoofs from behind. The tug snicked Blackie's legs from under his rearing body, and Blackie hit the ground with all his weight, flat on his side.

Smoky had just time to rush in and rake the old stallion's ribs with his teeth before Blackie was up. And the black's splayed hoofs were on the rope.

Smoky could neither rear nor retreat for an instant. The black was at him. That freed the rope, but before Smoky could get out of the way, the big stud had struck with his full weight. It was a hundred and fifty pounds more than Smoky had and Smoky went down. Blackie went up and threshed down with those huge hoofs across Smoky's side. . . .

The six men had come over the ridge into full sight. The fighting stallions had not seen them, but the frightened mares—alarmed at the men, not the fight—and younger stock, had seen and were retreating.

It was the nature of the mares to watch the fight, patiently waiting for the winner to emerge and take charge of them, not caring which should be the winner, knowing by instinct that the fittest would win. But it was not in them to wait and watch with men approaching—except that the grulla filly, and the bay fifty who had whinnied from the herd to Smoky hours before, were retreating with reluctance.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Sissorbill, as Smoky went down and Blackie struck. "Let's stop it before that old stud clubs the grulla to death with them hoofs."

"God, yes!" agreed Westy.

Then Smoky writhed aside and avoided the next blow. He was up in the same movement. He began a retreat now, not running like a whipped horse, but backing and dodging, giving way up the slope toward the scattering wild troop.

Blackie stepped on the dragging rope again. Smoky's lunge at the same instant jerked the black half around and the rattling saddle flipped up against his belly. Blackie bent to bite at the thing. He turned his tail to Smoky. And Smoky was at him, trying to twist the tendons of Blackie's hind legs with his strong young teeth. And succeeding.

With a blare of pain and fear the black turned and reared. But for once by the thinness of a split second Smoky was ahead of him in the rearing. And ahead of him in starting down.

His hoofs struck and raked the black's breast and belly, threw him off balance. Blackie hit the ground again, flat on his side. Smoky was at him, with hoofs and teeth. On him, with all fours.

Blackie bawled in the terror of a whipped horse—whipped, unless he could get an immediate and swift advantage.

He got it. Got it through the help of the rope. For Smoky was abruptly tangled in the line. It made him stagger aside and gave the old black time to get up. He hurled his weight at Smoky in one devastating final attack and struck Smoky smashingly. But Smoky did not go down. Blackie was tangled in the rope too.

In an instant they were bound together, Smoky's head down under Blackie's throat, the rope going over Blackie's neck and down to a foreleg. The leverage was terrific. The rope cut into Smoky's throat, shutting off his wind completely.

THE six men went riding in. Smoky saw them out of his congested, blearing eyes. Blackie saw them too. The two horses were bound together at the shoulders and necks. They see-sawed and pushed and heaved. They grunted and groaned for breath.

Smoky was getting no air at all. Slowly his knees began to give. Their hoofs ceased their milling and tearing at the ground. Then Smoky's knees broke and he went down. The black was half on top of him. . . .

The men rode up in a swirl of dust.

"Hell!" stormed Westy. "They've choked one another to death."

"Deader'n doornails."

But Smoky heard the men. Sensed their hateful, dangerous presence.

"By God, they're still squirmin'!" Sissorbill shouted.

"That grulla is, anyhow."

"Damn, he's game."

"Cut the rope and see if they can get up!"

The men got off their horses with a noisy flapping of their chaps. Smoky heard. More dead than alive the gameness in him gave one final heave. The rope snapped in two at the brass eyelet of the loop.

"Look, he's loose! He don't know what quittin' is—the game son-of-a-gun!"

"Get a rope on him!"

"Not on foot. He'll jump you if you try it."

They whipped back to their saddles, swung up.

"Get your ropes down, men!" Sissorbill breathed with eagerness. "Don't let him get away."

Smoky twisted and heaved up, rasping for breath, trembling, his knees tottering. And Blackie made it to his feet too. He was in no better condition. But he made an inarticulate sound and moved on Smoky.

"I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed one of the men.

Smoky tried to squeal and lunge at the old stud. The best that he could do was to stumble against him. And Blackie tumbled over.

"By God!" said Westy in a kind of awe. "That was the gamest thing I ever saw."

Oddly the men sat there making no move to use their ropes, though they were ready. And queer looks were on their faces.

Smoky swung his weary head and looked up the slope. Grulletta and the bay were up there, the only members of the wild herd still in sight. Smoky went stumbling toward them, rasping for breath.

"And he can go, for all o' me," said Westy. "After that fight."

"And me."

"And me."

They looked at Sissorbill. That tall, lank man was dubiously massaging his nose with a middle finger, and there was a shining look in his eyes.

"Me too," he whispered.

Smoky touched noses with the bay filly and the grulla. He looked back. The men were riding away. Old Blackie was limping off in another direction. Smoky took a deep breath and there from the hilltop flung a challenge to the world.

He was a herd stallion by his own right and might.

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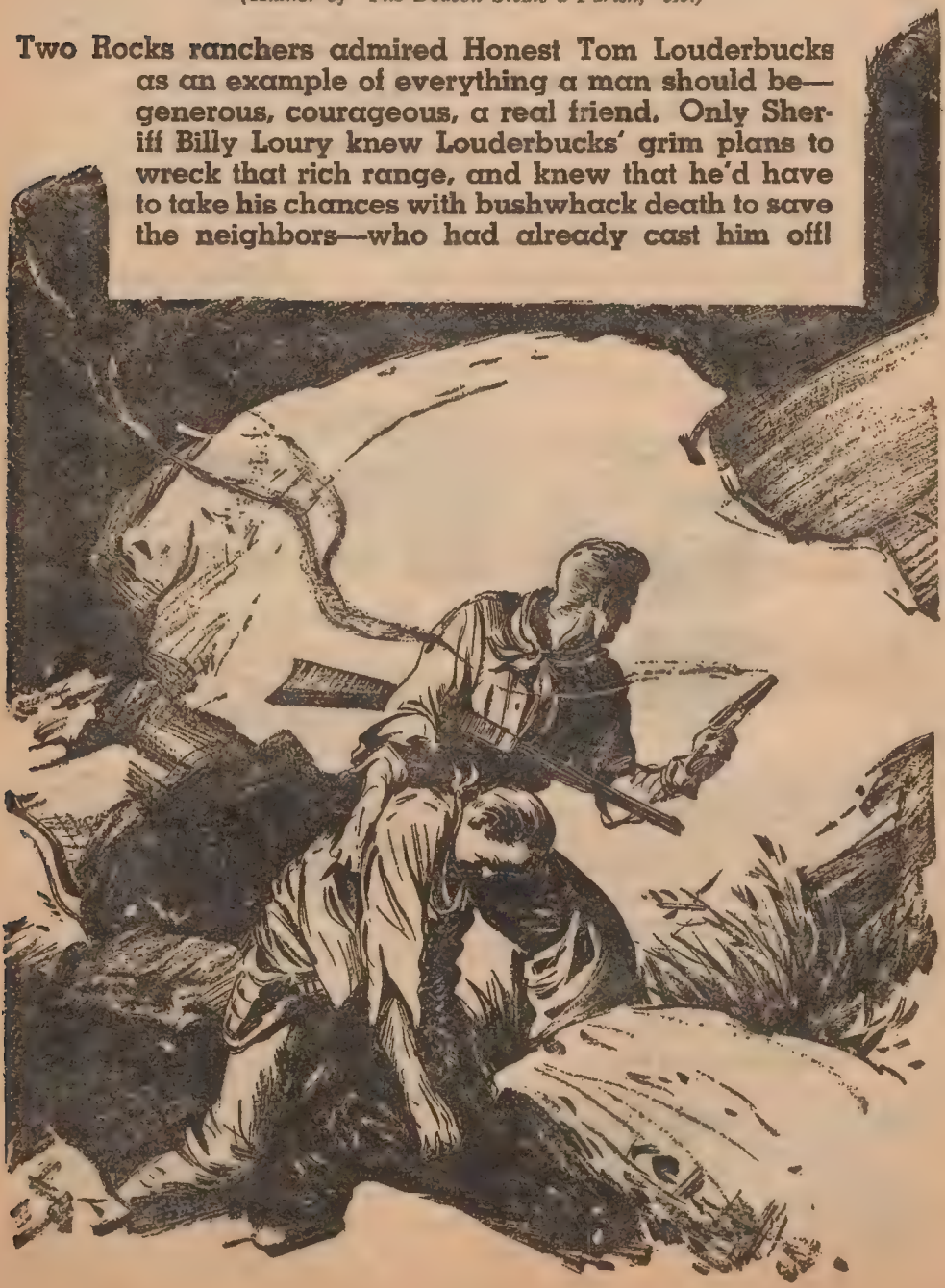

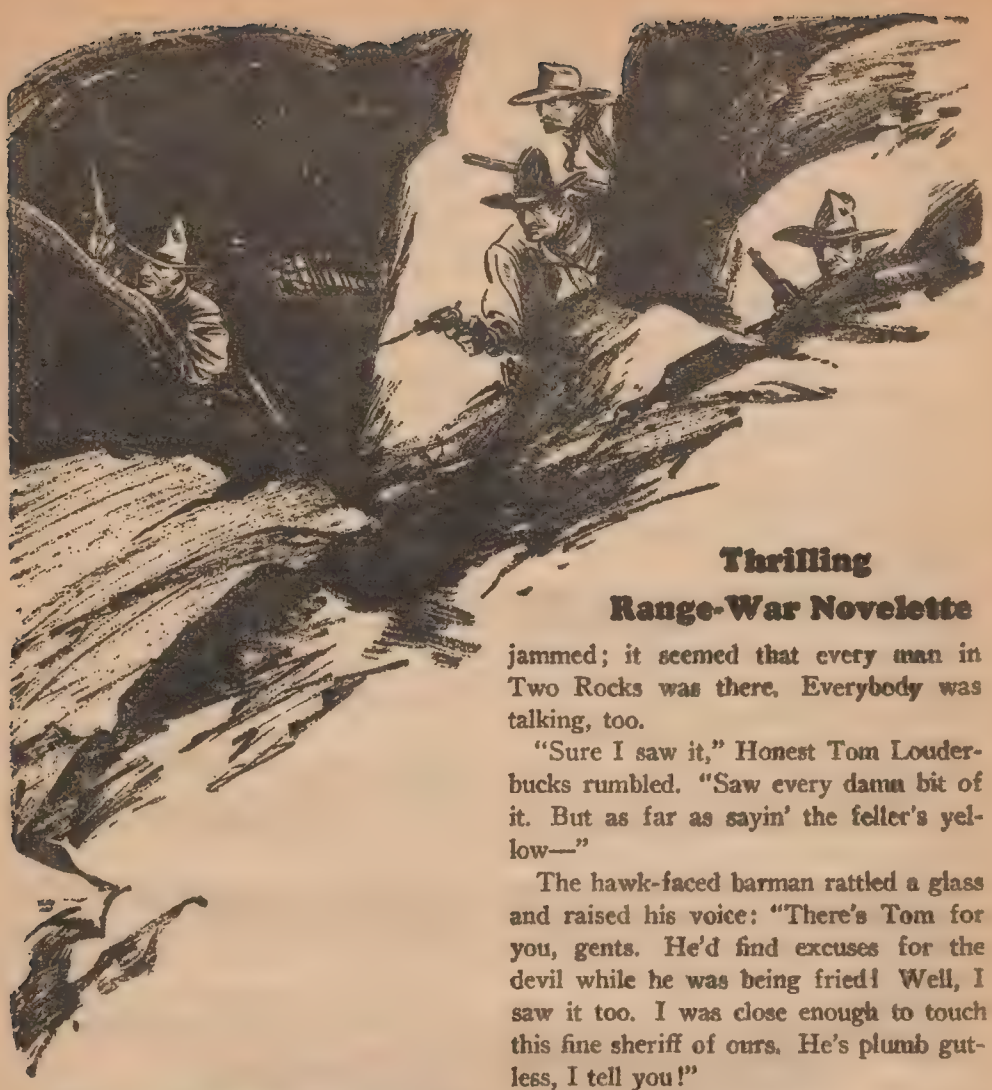

Thrilling Range-War Novelette

HONEST TOM LOUDERBUCKS was a great man. Two Rocks agreed heartily on that. You liked to go into his Roundup Saloon and hear his deep, warm voice say: "How you fixed for diamonds, feller?" That was his greeting, and there was always his broad grin to back it up. He had a lot of genial talk, and when he talked, you somehow knew his heart was in everything he said.

He'd be juggling the two diamonds he'd had set in gold nuggets, juggling them like another man would a couple of chunks of worthless float.

He wasn't grinning much, though, this particular morning. The Roundup was jammed; it seemed that every man in Two Rocks was there. Everybody was talking, too.

"Sure I saw it," Honest Tom Louderbucks rumbled. "Saw every damn bit of it. But as far as sayin' the feller's yellow—"

The hawk-faced barman rattled a glass and raised his voice: "There's Tom for you, gents. He'd find excuses for the devil while he was being fried! Well, I saw it too. I was close enough to touch this fine sheriff of ours. He's plumb gutless, I tell you!"

"Loury had a chance to draw, didn't he?" someone yelled.

"Sure he did. Plenty." The barkeep rubbed sweat from a narrow forehead. "What'll you have, friend? Rye? Pour it yourself. . . . Brucker was standing right there when he plugged young Cooper. Blasted the side of his head off. Loury was so close to Cooper that blood splattered all over him. Scared? Loury's face twisted all up like he'd been hit with a whip. He could have drawed an' covered Brucker, but he didn't. Shivering too much, by God! Brucker pulled Loury's gun out an' slung it across the room. Loury dropped his beer glass an' just

stood there. Watch out for the glass underfoot; it's still there. . . . Beer for you, neighbor? Yeah, beer was what Loury was drinkin'. O. K., whiskey it is. . . . "

"Seems kind of a shame," said Tom Londerbucks with a grin. "Young feller like Billy Loury with no sand under his belt."

IN the sheriff's office Billy Loury sat at his desk, staring straight ahead. Well, the word was out. He was a coward—yellow. Funny how it worked inside a fellow. He had been afraid then. But he wasn't now.

He had always known that he carried the seeds of fear in him. It was something he didn't have any control over! It swelled up in him whether he wanted it to or not, like happiness, or sorrow, or sympathy.

Some men had it, some didn't. He was one of the unlucky ones. When he had time to think, he could see it coming, and take it by the throat and not let it whip him. He could feel it worrying at him inside his belly, yet still go ahead without being afraid. But he hadn't had time to think, there in the Roundup.

Billy Loury looked at the dark red smears that young Cooper's blood had made on his shirt sleeve. It hadn't been the first time he had felt the claws of fear ripping at him. Billy Loury had learned long ago to clamp his teeth together, and steady his breathing so that his fear wouldn't show. But this time everything had happened so swiftly. Almost as if it had been planned to show Two Rocks that there really was no nerve in him.

Billy Loury got up and went to the window. In the dusk the street was deserted. His mind went away from the stark happening in the Roundup Saloon, began to deal with what those happenings implied.

War! That was what was being planned. Len Brucker had had no personal quarrel with young Cooper. But Cooper was a Wineglass rider, and Brucker was one of the men, rumored to be gunhands, brought in by Matt Starr of the Lazy B.

Matt Starr had recently come into the country, bought the Lazy B. Trouble had flared immediately between him and Moore McLean, Wineglass owner. There had always been an understanding that the Wineglass could use Spider Canyon—the gateway to summer feed in the hills. Spider Canyon, however, lay on legitimately owned Lazy B range. Starr had denied McLean the use of it.

Faced with sure ruin, Moore McLean would fight. There would be men to help him, while Matt Starr would buy or force others to his side. And when the fighting was done, someone would step in to piece together an empire from the wreckage.

Yes, that was the plan, or part of it. There had been some faked shadow of a quarrel between Brucker and Cooper, but Brucker had been hired to touch off the war. He had been hired, too, to point out the flaw in the one man who might check its course. He had earned his money both ways.

Billy Loury's lean shoulders lifted. He walked back to the desk, got his hat and put it on. They would expect him to go out after Brucker, he supposed. But he wasn't going to. Brucker was only a pawn in a big and dangerous game. Left at large, he might be used eventually to checkmate the king.

The air outside was frostily keen. Traffic was light on the street—a few figures on foot humping through the gloom, hip-slung broncs lined at hitching racks. Most of Two Rocks was inside, drinking and talking.

Boots stirring up hollow echoes, Billy Loury stalked toward the Roundup Saloon. A shape loomed gradually a dozen

feet in front of him. Yellow window light sprayed over it momentarily, and Loury drew in his breath softly.

He hadn't wanted to meet Arlene McLean just now.

Then she was saying his name with a queer sort of restraint: "Billy?"

"Yes," he said, steeling himself to tell her what he knew he must. In the three years of his sheriffing in Two Rocks—three years of fighting down that alien thing within him—he had come to love the daughter of Moore McLean. And she loved him; or she had.

"Billy, it isn't true! They're calling you yellow, Billy!" Faint reflected light touched the curve of her cheek, the slope of her chin, danced against the surface of her dark eyes. Billy Loury's love for her was suddenly like a weight in his throat.

"I reckon it is," he said.

"You let Brucker go because you were afraid! They're trying to smash the Wineglass. You know that. You might have stopped it, and you didn't!"

"Brucker doesn't count for much in this game," he told her huskily.

Her voice was low as she replied, "What does count is that I've let myself love a coward."

BILLY LOURY'S mind cried, "It's something I can whip! I have whipped it, all my life, until tonight!" But he couldn't say it aloud. Words sounded foolish, saying that.

The girl whispered, "It hurts you to have me say it, doesn't it? The same way you've hurt me, Billy Loury. I believed in you, trusted you. You've killed that. Whatever there was between us is over, and I hope—I hope in the name of God I never see you again!"

The last of her words were blurred by sobs. She slipped past him, and the dark closed around him like an icy fist.

For a long minute he stood without moving, the breath stirring heavily in his lungs. His lips moved as he murmured, "If I'd have let Tom have his way three years ago, this never could have happened." It was a flat statement, made with no regret, no bitterness.

The words brought to life again the purpose which had drawn him from the office. Ahead of him, light splashed through the swinging doors of the Roundup Saloon. He walked toward it, his mind growing crisp and cool.

He noted that a man was lounging in the dark on the near side of the doors. He let his long fingers touch the cold butt of the gun at his hip.

The man slid out as Loury came up. He blocked the walk, hands on hips, wide shoulders slouched. That chilled feeling crept into Billy Loury's stomach. He made his lips grin, and said to himself, "Not this time, damn you."

"If I didn't know better," the low-shouldered man was saying, "I'd allow you had guts, coming back here."

Loury got a look at his face then. He knew him slightly. A newcomer in Two Rocks—Red Lintz, an insolent braggart who had built up a reputation as a gunman.

Billy Loury said nothing.

"Cooper was a friend of mine," Lintz growled. "That mean anything to you?"

That tight feeling in Billy Loury was going away now. He said softly, "Only that Cooper must have done a blamed poor job of picking his friends."

Lintz stared. "Why, you damned yellow-livered pup!"

"Be sure of that, Lintz. You'll have to prove it."

Billy Loury was conscious that men were drifting out of the Roundup behind Lintz. He picked out the tall figure of Tom Louderbucks surveying the scene with cool indifference.

Lintz's voice was a choked rasp: "It's

been proved. You stood by an' watched Cooper murdered! I'm paying off for Cooper, damn you!"

Loury was watching Lintz's right hand. He saw then, as if a bolt of lightning had illuminated it, that the gunman's shirt had worked out from his belt and was fouling his gun butt. Lintz had been so supremely confident of his opponent's cowardice he had not troubled to test his weapon!

Loury cried sharply, "Look out—!"

The rest of the warning was lost in Lintz's curses. The gunman's hand caught in his shirt. He flung it free, snatched again at his Colt.

Time was not what Billy Loury wanted, but he had plenty of it. With timing as precise as the minute cogs in a watch he waited until his margin of safety had vanished. Then his gun slid out, stabbed flame.

Lintz stumbled to his knees, crawled up again, left hand pawing at his right arm. Blood ran down over the gun which tumbled out of limp fingers. He cursed Loury with a bitter stream of oaths.

Somewhere in the crowd behind Lintz a man blurted, "Damn him. He seen Lintz's iron was fouled. That's howcome he had the guts for a shoot-out!"

Billy Loury's jaw tightened, but he did not try to answer. He went past Lintz and stopped close in front of Tom Louderbucks.

"I came back here," he said, "to talk—with you."

"Sure," said Honest Tom Louderbucks smoothly. "Come on in." He tossed one of the diamonds up, caught it deftly as he turned.

CHAPTER TWO

Lone Wolf Lawman

ACROSS the scarred pine desk in the Roundup's inner office the two men faced each other.

"Lintz was your man," said Billy Loury.

Honest Tom Louderbucks was smiling. "I always aim to finish off what I start."

"So do I, Tom."

They were much alike, challenging each other there grimly. Both were lean men—both tall. And both had the flame of spirit in their eyes. There the resemblance ended.

Louderbucks was perhaps five years older. His mouth was broad and hard, and when he was not smiling, it was cruel. The set of his jaws showed he was a driver. The film of geniality was gone from his eyes now. There was a wild and reckless quality in them—a boldness and a cunning. He was not the same man who boomed heartily from the floor of the Roundup: "How you fixed for diamonds, feller?"

There was no recklessness in Billy Loury—he had never been able to afford it. Because of that weakness in him he had always had to rule himself steadily. That showed in the quiet strength of his lips, in the two deep lines carved between his straight-gazing blue eyes.

Louderbucks said briefly. "You've always been a coward, Billy. Ever since you were a kid. Everybody in Two Rocks knows it now. The best thing you can do is clear out."

"Cowardice is a funny thing, Tom. It works different in different people. I took this sheriffing job three years ago. You know why. I didn't want it. But I've made it stick so far, an' I'm going to keep trying. You hired Matt Starr to start a war that will wreck this country. I'm going to stop it!"

"You always were a damn fool, too!" Louderbucks ripped at him.

"I reckon so," said Loury. "I can't help that either."

Loury was thinking of an old man—an old man who had believed in a boy who

was rotten at heart. Old Jason Louderbucks had spent what should have been his prime years, in a wheel-chair on an Idaho ranch. Seventeen years ago he had pulled his pony alongside a runaway buckboard. He had stopped it, and saved the life of the ten year old boy clinging in panic to the reins, but in doing so he had been jerked under the flailing hoofs of the gun-shot-maddened mustangs.

It hadn't mattered to Jason Louderbucks that the man who lay dead across the buckboard seat had been a nester—a nester killed because of more than a suspicion of rustling. He had adopted the homeless kid, Billy Loury.

But there was something wrong with the youngster. Maybe it was that wild, terror-filled ride behind the runaways with his father dead beside him, which had done it. There was a streak of fear in Billy Loury.

Old Jason had tried not to be unfair to the kid. But it was hard when his own son had the qualities he respected. Reckless, bold, sure of himself was Tom Louderbucks—a hard rider, and a fighter. Crippled old Jason had centered his pride and his hopes on Tom. The qualities he wanted to see had blinded him to the rest of the man his son was.

But Loury knew. He could see that Tom Louderbucks was reckless only when there was a gallery. That he was bold only when he held high cards. That he was a fighter only when the issue was in no doubt.

Old Jason had died unaware of those things. Billy Loury had been alone with him when the last of his life slipped away. Tom Louderbucks was dead drunk in the back room of a saloon; Loury had lied and said he was riding for a doctor.

The stern control with which old Jason had always ruled himself, had broken there at the end. Loury's eyes still stung when he remembered the straggled wisps of sweat-drenched white hair on the old man's wrinkled forehead, the fiercely burning appeal in his faded eyes, his queer, cracked, pleading voice:

"Billy, I've never asked you for anythin' before. I'm askin' yuh now—one thing. About Tom. He's goin' to turn out—the man I wanted to be, Billy. The blood's in him. He's showed it. There's a few men—carved out of the stuff that takes 'em 'way up on top. Men with names that last. Tom's one of 'em. Only he's maybe the least mite too reckless. You got to—help him, Billy. You got to see to it—that that stuff comes out in him. Promise me that—an' I reckon I can die without whinin'. Promise me that. Billy!"

Loury couldn't forget then, standing there by the bedside, that Jason had crippled himself saving the life of a youngster. That he had given that fatherless youngster a home. So the quick, short nod of his head sealed Billy Loury's promise that night.

Maybe old Jason had been a little out of his head when he had exacted that promise. But Loury didn't look at it that way. And a year later he had followed Tom Louderbucks when Tom sold the ranch and left Idaho. In Two Rocks Tom had set himself up in the saloon business. Billy had fought for the sheriff's job, had gotten it. Billy Loury, the coward, watching Honest Tom Louderbucks, the man who was rotten at heart! Three years of it. But now Tom Louderbucks had had enough of that. . . .

With the overhead light shining on the bones of his lean face, Billy Loury said, "I came down here to give you one more chance, Tom. Call off Starr and his gunhawks. You've made a decent name for yourself. Hang on to it."

Tom Louderbucks laughed. "I'm fed up with sweating my guts out for chicken-feed. If you've got any chances, use 'em yourself. You'll need 'em. Now beat it.

I'm losin' money standing here talking to you."

NO ONE spoke or nodded to Loury as he went out through the saloon. He felt the impact of sneering disapproval. He noticed that the place was not as full as it had been, and that outside the faint concerted thunder of hoofs hung in the chill air. Someone was pulling out of town.

He stopped a man entering the saloon and nodded toward the sound. "Who was that?"

"Moore McLean an' some of his boys," grunted the man. "Headin' for the Lazy B to get Brucker, seein' as there's a sheriff who don't dare."

Loury turned away sharply, began to run toward the jail. Fiery, hot-tempered Moore McLean would lead his Wineglass men with their guns loose in their holsters. And a fight at the Lazy B would plunge the range into a war which could not be stopped.

Precious minutes were lost in saddling at the jail corral. Then Billy Loury was whirling through the dark of Two Rocks' main street, echoes racing behind him. He cleared the last of the buildings, pounded across the low plank bridge over the moon-silvered sheet of the river.

The land was level and low, stretching away limitlessly in the moonlight, and he put his three-year-old gray over it at a hungry pace. The sound of the Wineglass riders' running had died.

Billy Loury's breath was short and crisp in his throat. When he thought of what might lie ahead of him that familiar chill began to creep slowly into his belly. He made his lips grin, as he had schooled himself to do.

Better than an hour of hard riding brought him into the hills. Beyond was the black outline of timber. The river, broken by fast water into a multitude of shining particles, was on his left. Half of another hour and a dark huddle of buildings came rising out of the moon-swept dark.

There were men in the yard. Horses idling restlessly. Billy Loury pulled in the gray, came up carefully. He heard the silky voice of Matt Starr purring, "If Len Brucker done a killing in Two Rocks it's no hide off me. He quit this morning, pulled out."

"Like hell!" old Moore McLean growled. "He's your man, an' I'm bettin' he's here. We come after him, Starr, an' we want him."

A man rode out from the group up to Loury. He squinted at him briefly, gun out and ready, then turned back. "Sheriff," he explained succinctly.

Moore McLean looked up heavily, but he did not speak. Nor did anyone else. Loury stopped so that he, Starr and McLean formed the corners of a triangle. On the far side of them all were the dark shapes of the ranch and bunk houses.

Moonlight struck down, outlining the men in the yard clearly. Starr was on foot, with two of his gunhands flanking him. He was slight of build, sharp of chin and nose—sharp and quick of eye. He could move with the striking speed of a freighter's bull whip.

All of the Wineglass men were mounted. There were eight of them, grimly and silently alert. Moore McLean bulked like a bear in his saddle. A full dark beard hid his jaws and mouth. There was no subtlety in him. He always hammered straight for what he wanted, regardless of hell or the devil, but he had built a reputation for square-dealing in the Two Rocks country.

Starr purred easily, "Taken over the sheriff's job, have you, McLean?"

"Figger it any way you please. I want Brucker."

"You won't get him. He's not here, and

I wouldn't give him to you if he was. Better hit back to Two Rocks. You can tell 'em there you're not as big a noise in these parts as you thought you were."

McLean's head jerked up angrily. He bent his huge body forward in the saddle. "I'll get him, Starr. And there'll come a time when I'll get you along with him!"

"So?" Matt Starr shrugged. "Long talk may go down in this country. It don't where I come from. If a gent made fight talk with seven gunies at his back they wouldn't call him a hero."

Billy Loury saw then what Starr was doing. He wanted the fight to break. He was goading McLean, twisting scornful words in him until there could be no backing down. But three against eight? His glance darted to the dark buildings. If Lazy B riflemen were posted there. . . .

He started to speak, but Moore McLean's voice broke in harshly: "All right, Starr. It had to come sooner or later, anyhow." Without turning his head he snapped. "Get back, boys. This'll be between him an' me."

"Let 'em stay," drawled Starr. "So they can see how it's done." He stood easily, his feet firm, his right arm crooked slightly. Moore McLean loomed large and silent and motionless on his horse.

Billy Loury cried sharply, "Hold it, both of you! I'll jail the man that fires the first shot! McLean!"

SAVAGELY the Winegless owner whirled on him. "Keep out of this, you damned coward! You had your chance against Brucker."

"Nice play," Starr murmured. "You two had all this ribbed beforehand, eh? Wasn't it you, McLean, that put Loury into office?"

McLean jerked out an oath. "I made that mistake, but I ain't makin' it again. Damn a man without any guts!"

Anger surging in him, Billy Loury pushed his bronc between the two men. "You blind?" he ripped at McLean. "Can't you see what he's up to? You're trapped. There's men planted—"

"Shut up and get out of the way, damn you!" McLean lashed back. "Get out or I'll shoot you out of the saddle!"

In that moment of icy silence, fury lashed between the two men. Matt Starr stood watching, his gaze sardonic. McLean meant what he said; every line of his huge frame screamed that. Loury was as rigid as if he had turned to stone. There was that voice in his brain crying for him to back out, back down before lead tore and slashed at him. But he didn't move. Only his lips changed, forcing themselves into a queer, tortured grin.

McLean dropped a hand to holster top. Before he could draw, a voice shattered the terrific strain of that stillness: "Dad! Dad!"

Moore McLean's head lifted slowly, turned over his shoulder. The taut quiet which had amounted to tumult had permitted the rider to come up unheard. It was Arlene McLean, her hat gone, her mount foaming. She brushed close in to her father.

He had recognized her voice, and after that first quick look he did not turn his face to her again. "Go home," he said. "I've got a job to do here."

But she was talking swiftly, her voice high-pitched. "Not now, Dad. I heard talk in town that you were coming out here and that Starr was waiting for you. It's some kind of a trick."

"There's no trick that hot lead can't beat," said McLean. "Leave me alone, girl. Get back."

Close against him still, the girl looked about her swiftly. Her gaze passed over Loury; she gave no sign of recognition. She turned to her father again. "You're covered, Dad—from the house. The rest

of his men must be there or he wouldn't be daring you like this. Starr will wipe out every one of you if you give him a chance."

The hard intentness which had allowed Moore McLean to see nothing but Starr lifted. His heavy shoulders jerked slightly, as if he were shaking it off. He looked at the dark bulk of the buildings, then back at Matt Starr.

"Some other time, Starr," he said. It was a grim promise.

Matt Starr said nothing. His sharp, quick eyes pursued McLean as the Wineglass owned pulled his mount around abruptly, jerked a hand at his riders. They, too, turned, and with Arlene McLean jostling in their midst loped away into the night.

Walking with swift precision, Matt Starr came up to Billy Loury. He said smoothly, "Kid, I don't know just what it was happened in town tonight, but I'm thinking they've got you wrong. Maybe you and me could pull together."

Loury stared down at the sharp, dapper man Tom Louderbucks had hired to smash the Two Rocks cattle range. "I reckon not, Starr. It'll be you or me before this is over."

"Suit yourself. But if that's the way you feel about it, better get started."

"Not quite yet, Starr. If Brucker's here, I want him."

CHAPTER THREE

Coward's Gunsmoke

STARR'S lip curled. "Heard me tell McLean that Brucker quit this morning, didn't you?"

"Yeah. All the same, I'll take a look."

Men had come drifting out of the ranch house, cradling Winchesters. Loury was not looking at them, or at Starr. He was staring beyond them, dealing with the bitter thought that was in his mind: a lawman is worth no more than the respect he is able to command!

The words and the action of old Moore McLean had driven home in him the realization that he counted for nothing in this brewing war. It would come to stormy conclusion in spite of anything he might do now. How had McLean phrased it? "You had your chance against Brucker." That was his mistake. Two Rocks might have found excuses for him had he taken to Brucker's trail, brought him back. He hadn't done it, for reasons which seemed good enough at the time. Well, they hadn't been good enough. And no one would understand now if he tried to explain. His one hope now, it seemed to him, was to get Brucker.

Matt Starr was saying smoothly, "Sure. Take a good look. I'm not trying to buck the law here. Everything I do is straight up and according to Hoyle."

Two of the Lazy B men trailed Billy Loury as he searched the ranch buildings. He made a thorough job of it, and when he was through he said to Starr, "Sorry. Seems like I made a mistake."

Starr smiled slightly, the moonlight gleaming on his teeth. "The Law's always welcome here, Loury. Come again."

"If I do," said Billy Loury, "maybe I'll have better luck." He pushed his bronc away from the ranch at a lazy canter, his back crawling at the thought that it might draw a bullet. None came, and the night folded around him quietly.

A mile from the Lazy B he stopped and looked back. He hooked a knee over the horn and waited, scanning his backtrail to discover if he were being followed. He hadn't found Brucker, but on a nail in the bunkhouse had hung a new belt with the initials L. B. worked into it with brass tacks. Under the bunk had been a war-sack, which indicated with fair certainty that Len Brucker had not quit. The Lazy B was still his headquarters. If so, he would be coming back to it.

Carefully Loury worked over the country in his mind, meanwhile letting his pony drift in the general direction of the river. Brucker would be in the high hills now, probably. He would come down the river because it would obliterate any sign and because it would give him cover to a point closer to the Lazy B than any other.

The gurgling whisper of tumbling water reached him in the midst of these thoughts. He made out the dim shapes of willows, and for some thirty minutes he skirted them, working toward the hills. He did not want the sound of shots to carry to the Lazy B. Satisfied on that score at last, he stopped, took the gray's saddle off and hobbled him. There was the rush of the chill air around him, and the tinkling mutter of the stream.

It did not seem right that he should be waiting there to kill a man, but he was. There would be no other way to take Brucker. The only doubt in his mind was whether or not he could. He had heard much talk of the gunman's skill.

Not more than nine hours ago he had seen Brucker draw and kill—savagely, ruthlessly. That move had been executed with a puma-like swiftness. Again Loury heard Moore McLean snarling at him: "Keep out of this, you damned coward!" Funny how it worked in a man. He wasn't afraid now; he would be when Brucker came, if Brucker did come. But he thought he could whip it.

DAWN came, covering one shade of gray with another until the sky was its proper blue. Through the long day Billy Loury crouched there in the willows. He dozed a little, for a few minutes at a time. Then the sun had drawn blood with its last blow at the sky and was dropping below the timbered hill rim.

The twilight was almost night when the sound of a louder splashing drifted over the running whisper of the stream. Loury stood up. There was an open space in the willows and he got a clear view of fifty feet of river. The splashing came on—a pony testing the footing under some six inches of water.

Loury had his gun out and in his hand. His palm was wet and he had to grip hard. The front of his belly was against his backbone, tight. Nobody was there to see what was going to happen. Just Brucker—who was wary, cold-blooded and fast.

The rider came sliding into the open space. Loury recognized the set of Brucker's shoulders, the big hammer-headed dun he rode. He waited until Brucker was too far downstream to go back. In a voice he didn't recognize he said, "Don't go for your gun, Brucker. You're covered."

It was a useless warning, and he knew it. A finger of flame splashed out from the dark blot in the river. Loury hadn't seen him move. Gun across the saddle horn, probably. Loury shot carefully, and the buck of the gun in his fist knocked that feeling out of his stomach. He was a clear target, as Brucker was. He'd wanted it that way.

Brucker was shooting fast. Loury didn't hear the hiss of the lead; the thunder-claps of his own shots were slamming into his head. Brucker's horse went down, thrashing up a curtain of spray. Orange-red flame spurted behind it.

Two slugs smashed into Billy Loury almost at the same instant. The first, striking just inside his left arm-pit, twisted him so that the second broke his arm instead of killing him. On his knees, he shot back at the man standing in the river. As he was triggering, the black sky crashed down on his skull.

How long he lay face down there in the willows, he never knew. It was still dark when his senses began coming back

to him. Everything was in a queer, dream-like kind of fog—a fog that sent pain racing through him with each drumming beat of his heart. He heard the rippling murmur of the stream, and he crawled down to it and tossed water over his head with a cupped right hand. There was no strength in him. Lots of blood lost, he thought. There was no sign of Brucker or his horse.

The thought came to him that he was likely to die there. If he hadn't got Brucker, it wouldn't matter. But he would have to get out of this, he told himself grimly, to find out.

He crawled back to the hobbled gray. He couldn't lift the saddle and he gave up trying. When he found he couldn't untie the hobbles he cut them with his jackknife.

He got up on the gray somehow, using a heap of brush. He straddled the bony ridge of the back and dropped forward so that his chest lay on the gray's withers. He gripped the cropped mane with both hands. The gray was moving under him, and he passed out again.

THE SUN was shining down on him through a network of pine boughs when he opened his eyes. He was lying on his back on a bank of pungently smelling pine needles. He tried to raise up on his elbow and immediately felt dizzy and sick.

A voice advised him, "Don't try to move now. You'll shift the bandages." The voice was quite expressionless, but Billy Loury knew whose it was.

He turned his head and saw that Arlene McLean was standing a little distance away. Her dark eyes were on him soberly. They grew cold as he looked at them, and he had an impression that it was because of the hurt which lay beneath their surfaces.

She touched a lock of brown hair which had slipped down over her forehead, and flushed. She used to do that, Billy Loury thought, and then she'd smile.

His gaze was running hungrily over her smooth, sun-darkened cheek and her chin with the little cleft in it which he had always admired. But she gave him no response whatever.

Loury's face tightened as a shaft of pain from his arm hit him. He looked at the trees over him until the pain was gone, and then said, "Where am I?"

"On Wineglass range," Arlene told him steadily.

"How long have I been here?"

"Since last night."

"And you found me?"

"We have guards out, you know," she said with a hint of anger. "I was one of them."

"Thanks—for fixing me up. Bronc must have brought me here, I reckon. He's traveled it enough times. He thought maybe he'd get grain-fed, like he used to."

That reference to what had been, made the girl's chin tilt up. Stung by the thought, she countered coldly, "So Starr didn't want any part of you, either?"

The two lines in Billy Loury's forehead deepened. She believed that he had quarreled with Starr back at the Lazy B ranch house, that Starr had shot him! Tell her the truth? He realized bitterly that he couldn't prove it. What had become of Brucker he didn't know. It would sound like a coward's lie.

"If it matters," he told her huskily, "you needn't have taken the trouble you did over me. I'd have been dead soon enough if you hadn't."

She was staring at him steadily. "I didn't want to be responsible for it."

A rough stubbornness grew in Loury. "You don't need to be, any more. Thanks again. I can make out now."

"No, you can't. It will be two days

anyway before you can move. You'll need food. I can't take you to the ranch. When you can ride, if there's any gratitude in your kind, you'll get out of this country and never come back."

Billy Loury had that to think of during the rest of the day.

A little after nightfall, Arlene returned with food, water and clean dressings for his arm and the furrow in his scalp. Neither of them spoke that time. When she had gone Billy Loury ran his right hand along his left forearm to make sure. His fingers came away wet. Arlene McLean had wept as she dressed his wounds.

HE GOT up later that night to see what his strength was like. He was still weak. It was the loss of blood chiefly, he decided.

Daylight came dull and murky. Loury spent part of the time on his feet. He was restless, anxious for Arlene to return, but she did not.

Hours drifted by sluggishly. He felt that he was able to ride, but he stayed. There was a faint hope in him that somehow Arlene McLean might have changed, that she might have come to believe what was impossible for her to believe.

It was dusk, when he was beginning to believe that she would not come at all, that he saw her riding toward him through the trees.

She had brought him a saddle, and she dropped it on the ground near him. "You'll need more than a horse to ride out on," she said. "You'll find something to eat in the pockets."

"And if I should decide not to leave?"

She wouldn't answer that. Nor would she look at him.

"I've been here two days," Loury went on steadily. "What's happened?"

"Nothing."

"What's going to happen?"

Arlene turned on him swiftly. "Wineglass cattle are going through Spider Canyon into the hills! If it's war Matt Starr wants, we'll give it to him. Thank God there are men in this country who aren't afraid of him. The Wineglass will go broke fighting before it quits."

"When are you going through?"

"Tonight."

Loury asked bitterly, "Are you crazy enough to think Starr won't be watching for that?"

Arlene flung a scornful glance at him. "Let him. At least we won't be walking into a trap." She stared at him for a long time, then turned away abruptly to hide the pain which had come into her dark eyes.

She would have ridden away had not Billy Loury stepped to her side and put his hand over hers on the saddle horn. She tried to free herself, and could not.

Ignoring the blaze of anger she gave him, he said slowly, "Maybe I won't be seeing you again. If I don't, I reckon I won't ever stop loving you, anyhow. There's one think I'd like you to know—that maybe I'm not as bad as you think I am."

For one short instant, softness came into Arlene McLean's face. She whispered, "Oh, Billy. Billy—" She said no more. Whatever impulse had bade her reveal, she did not put into words. Her hand slipped from beneath his, and she spurred her pony away into the dusk.

Billy Loury picked up the saddle and walked to where the gray was tethered, back in the pines. His mind was cool and clear now. He was going to Two Rocks. Going after Honest Tom Louderbucks!

CHAPTER FOUR

Wind

RANGE war was thrumming in the air over the Two Rocks country that night. And war was rife in the heart of

Billy Loury, sheriff who had lost the respect and the trust of the men who had put him in office. The fight was coming, and he was powerless to stop it. Tom Louderbucks, hearty and jovial on the floor of the Roundup, had brought it about.

With the chilly weight of the night air flowing against him as he rode, Loury weighed what he was about to do. There was nothing legal about it. Yet there was the chance that if it succeeded the plans of Tom Louderbucks and Matt Starr would be broken.

His left arm was bandaged tightly in a sling. Against the jolt of the saddle, he had been supporting it with his good right hand. He dropped that hand now to pull his pistol out of its holster. He had not reloaded since his fight with Brucker. He accomplished that awkwardly.

On the plain ahead of him, the scattered lights of Two Rocks were springing up. Loury circled to the back of the town through a deserted alley, after crossing the river by the rattling plank bridge. Dismounting, he went forward on foot.

At the rear of the Roundup, he hesitated. Tom Louderbucks would be on the floor, as he always was at night, greeting newcomers, drinking with them. It would be impossible to get him out unseen. To attempt force would be senseless.

Loury slipped down the gap between the Roundup and the adjoining building. Except for patches of light straggling out of windows, the street was dark. Few people were abroad.

Loury fumbled for a rock between his feet. He waited with it in his hand until the traffic was lightest. Then he pitched it into the line of broncs hitched in front of the gambling layout directly across from the Roundup. Then he put two shots, high, through the gambling layout's front window. Before the clamoring echoes had died he was bawling at the top of his lungs, "There he goes. Get the son, damn him. There he goes!"

The ponies at the hitching rail were in a tangle. One of them had gone down in a kicking scramble. Doors along the street began to spout men. Billy Loury tugged his hat low on his forehead, and as the Roundup's occupants poured out, he joined them. He slid along the front of the saloon, stopped by the door.

Men brushed past him into the street in roaring confusion. Honest Tom Louderbucks sauntered to the door, stood there idly juggling his luck pieces.

Loury's gun jammed into his ribs. "Steady, Tom! Come along, and keep your mouth shut!"

Louderbucks peered at the figure beside him. "Loury? What the hell is this?"

THE BLUNT gun muzzle jammed harder. "Never mind. Pull over into the shadows here, easy-like. Stroll to the back. If you make a wrong move, Tom, I'll put a slug in you, so help me God!"

"You crazy?" exploded Louderbucks —but he had the good sense to mutter it between his teeth.

"Not in the least. I've got nothing to lose, remember. Coming?"

The deadly earnestness behind the words was unmistakable. Grudgingly, Louderbucks drifted along the front of the saloon, turned into the gap which led to the back. Disappointed and puzzled, men were seeping back off the street.

In the alley Louderbucks turned wrathfully. "Now, Loury, damn you—!"

Loury cut him off. "Your bronc is in the livery stable, isn't it? Rifle in the saddle boot? We'll get 'im."

With the threat of Billy Loury's gun on him, Tom Louderbucks walked into the stable, came out again with his horse. They returned down the alley to where Loury had left the gray. With Louderbucks in front, tautly silent, they moved out of Two Rocks.

"Where to?" snapped Louderbucks.

"Spider Canyon."

"You can't get away with this, Loury."

"We'll know by morning whether I can or not," said Billy Loury grimly. "Didn't figure on being in on what you'd started, did you, Tom? Well, you're going to be. God, you're a skunk, Tom. Bad as I am, I wouldn't trade my guts for yours. You've squatted there in the Roundup, everybody thinking what a great man you are. You've pulled the strings that'll send this range to hell, double-crossing the folks that believed you were a man. There'll be men killed, an' folks knocked out of their homes—all so you can make a few lousy dollars. But you wouldn't be risking your own hide. You haven't got the guts for that. Well, Tom, you're going to. Starr has got to be licked, an' licked proper. You're going to help with it. With a gun in your back!"

They were riding almost stirrup to stirrup, Louderbucks a little ahead. He turned his head to snarl, "Starr can't be licked, you fool!"

"You'll be fighting for the underdog," Loury jerked. "Win or lose you'll be the kind of man Jason wanted you to be."

They rode silently after that. A mile below the canyon Loury directed a swing to the west.

"Thought you were going to the canyon," Louderbucks flung over his shoulder.

"Not quite. McLean'll be down in the canyon. A man or so more there won't make any difference. Starr will have his gunhawks planted along the sides and on top. We're climbing that butte west of the canyon. It's too far away for Starr to use, but if we're on it we can cover Starr like a blanket."

THE moon had come out from behind clouds, shedding a wary brilliance over the land. They were climbing among the hills now—rugged, timbered promontories that loomed starkly black around them.

Loury's senses were alert for sounds which would indicate the battle had started. He had calculated that McLean would not make his run before midnight at the earliest. There was no sound; a thick, brooding quiet hung over the hills.

Loury said, "Starr knew the Wineglass was coming through tonight, of course."

"What do you think?" growled Louderbucks.

Five minutes later, Loury reined in. "Climb down," he told Louderbucks. On foot himself, he stared up at the jutting butte of granite. Its summit covered Spider Canyon, which lay on the far side.

In a taut whisper Louderbucks hissed, "It'll be suicide! There's a guard up there!"

As he stared up into the dark, that familiar sinking feeling hit Billy Loury in the pit of the stomach. The cords of his throat knotted so that he couldn't speak, and the hand on his pistol butt was shaking. Death was waiting for him up there.

As if from an enormous distance he heard Louderbucks snarl, "He'll pick us off. He's liable to spot us any minute!"

No need to tell Loury that—the thought was searing him like a hot blade. He had been afraid when he drove his horse between Matt Starr and Moore McLean, he had been afraid when he had forced that gun battle with Brucker. That same fear, magnified, was tearing at his entrails now. There had been something tangible to fight then—now there wasn't.

He whispered to himself, "Get up there, damn you!" But it didn't work. He stood rooted. He ran his tongue over his lips and they were like dried leather. Seconds were like ages. Through the trembling fury of the thoughts in his head a picture took shape indistinctly. A picture and a sentence. His hand was over Arlene Mc-

Lean's on the saddle horn and he was saying, "There's one thing I'd like you to know: that maybe I'm not as bad as you think I am."

And Arlene McLean had shown that she loved him, in spite of what she thought. That was it. Billy Loury knew suddenly that without Arlene McLean life would not be worth the living. He grinned, and this time it wasn't the grin he had to force. He wasn't going to make those words to her a lie.

"Licked it," he whispered. "Licked it, by God!" Tom Louderbucks was peering at him, and Loury said, "Get going!"

"I won't, damn it!" Louderbucks' voice was a whining rasp. "There ain't a chance, Loury. It'd be murder!"

"Shut up and move, damn you!"

Louderbucks was breathing spasmodically, his breath hissing in his throat. He started to turn, as if acquiescing. Then without warning he whirled and flung himself back against Loury. Loury was knocked backward and fell sprawling. Louderbucks was on top of him, fists clawing, knees doubled up.

Biting pain stung Loury's broken arm. He had no strength for the fight, and he knew it. But the blind panic of Tom Louderbuck's attack gave him his chance. The pistol was still in his good hand. He swung it twice, feeling for Louderbuck's head. The third swing found it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Glory Fighters

LOURY got to his feet slowly, setting his teeth against the blazing hurt in his shoulder. He had to sit down again until the dizziness cleared out of his head.

Loury got up again. There was no time to lose. It was past midnight by now, he judged. He got the rifle out of Louderbucks' saddle boot, and a box of cartridges out of the pocket. Then he knelt by the unconscious Louderbucks, got his shoulder under him and straightened up. That hurt. Mouth distorted, Loury staggered toward the granite butte.

Foot by foot he fought his way up the narrow trail, cursing himself for his lack of strength.

After about fifty feet, he stopped. A sudden swirl of giddiness almost made him topple backwards. He let Louderbucks slide off his shoulder. He'd never make it with that weight. Anger surged over him, and he knelt down, shaking Louderbucks violently. Louderbucks groaned, struggled.

Loury put the gun in his face. "Get up, damn you, an' climb, or I'm killing you now!"

Louderbucks got up, and they began to climb, Louderbucks scrambling in terror ahead. On up they went, Loury panting through locked teeth. The summit was looming against the cloud-blackened sky.

The flash of exploding powder pricked down at them from the summit. The crack of the shot bounced off into the hills. Louderbucks stumbled, let out a panicky gasp of pain. "Got me," he choked. "He—"

Gripping the rifle under his elbow, Loury tilted up his short gun. He triggered twice with steady precision. There was a scrape and scuffle of loose rock from above, and a body came plunging down.

As if those three shots had been accepted as a signal of some kind, a brisk chatter of gunfire swelled from beyond the butte.

"Get on!" Loury grated, jabbing Louderbucks with the gun. Not seriously hit, apparently, Louderbucks scrambled on up the trail. They came out on the top. It was smooth and afforded no cover at all. Louderbucks flung himself belly down.

"Don't shoot," he choked. "They'll spot the flashes. They'll blast us off here!"

Loury crouched, bracing himself against

the wind which had come racing out of the north. There was wild turmoil in the canyon below him. Thunder blared out of it. A dark seething mass of backs and horns crowded it from edge to edge.

The rocking claps of gun reports rolled up. Fragments of flame spouted all along the rims of the canyon. Loury had no time to waste now with Louderbucks. What Moore McLean had planned was clear enough. He was running cattle through, following with his guns to make their passage stick.

It was showdown!

The Wineglass cattle would stick, or McLean and the men with him would never ride back through the canyon!

Flashes in answer to those on the rim were already blooming near the canyon's mouth. Outnumbered, McLean's force rushed up the bottom grimly. The line broke, fell back, surged in confusion.

Billy Loury dropped to his stomach, pushed out the Winchester. With no left hand to use as a rest, he steadied the barrel on a knob of rock. He realized that Louderbucks was screaming something at him, but the words were lost in the greater racket coming from below. He began to pound the two rims of the canyon with lead, gauging the position of enemy gunmen from the flashes.

A SLUG flicked rock within inches of Loury's face, and it flashed through his mind that at least some of those below had turned their fire to silence him. That was the last he thought of it. He was firing as fast as he got targets, jamming fresh shells into the magazine, staving off a terrible weakness which seemed to be draining the blood out of his veins.

He saw that McLean and his men were coming back up the canyon. There was not as much noise now—not as many men shooting from the rim, it seemed. And there were less targets to fire at.

He was curiously angry at that—Starr was cheating him. He felt as if he had been lying there, sighting along his hot rifle barrel, for hours. Then there were no target-flashes at all. Someone below was shouting up.

Billy Loury crawled painfully to his feet. It struck him then, with the shock of an enormous surprise, that the thing was done. It was over, and Moore McLean had won.

He remembered Louderbucks then and went over to him. Louderbucks was still lying face down. A bullet had passed through his head.

Billy Loury stood there, staring down. When Moore McLean came, as he would, to investigate the rifleman on the butte, one of the two of them would be a hero. Loury didn't lie to himself. He wanted to be that hero. It would wipe out the scorn and contempt which were coupled with his name.

But there was only one rifle. And there was that promise he had made to old Jason Louderbucks. Well, that promise had been kept. The name of Tom Louderbucks would endure.

Billy Loury picked up the rifle, fastened the dead man's hands around it. Then as swiftly as he could he went back down the trail to his horse.

He was so weak that he got into the saddle with difficulty. He had to get away before McLean came, though. And he had to tie up his shoulder again, too. It had been bleeding a lot.

Loury made it away from there. Daylight was breaking as he stumbled through the door of his cabin in Two Rocks. He had a bottle of whiskey cached under his bunk, and of this he drank a tumblerful. It helped him. He would be able to move on, after a little. Get out of Two Rocks.

There was Arlene McLean, of course.

Loury couldn't straighten out his thoughts about her.

He sat down in a straight-backed chair and began to work at the bandages. It took him a long time; his fingers were clumsy and he had no control over them.

He was still fumbling at it when sunlight dazzled his eyes, and he looked up to see what had caused it. The door was open, and standing there was Arlene.

She closed the door and came toward him. There was something in her hand. She opened it and dropped three things into his lap. Two diamonds set in gold nuggets and a pocket torn off a shirt.

"It's not mine," said Loury hoarsely. But he looked down at his shirt, and saw that it was.

He heard Arlene McLean saying softly, "The rest of them think Tom Louderbucks went up there alone. I don't. There had been a struggle of some kind at the bottom—there were marks, and these things were there. I recognized your shirt—"

"He did go up alone," Loury blurted desperately. "There wasn't any kind of a struggle. He went up of his own will."

"You wouldn't know that, if you hadn't been there," she told him gently. "There's something wrong, Billy. You're not what this town thinks you are."

"Not any more," said Billy Loury huskily. "I left it—up there on that butte."

ARLENE didn't understand that, but she knelt by him, sobbing, and her arms went around him. "Oh, Billy, I've wanted you. I've loved you. I've tried not to, but I couldn't help it."

Billy Loury talked at last, talked from a heart which had been bursting for lack of the chance. He told her about that ancient fear, which was gone, and about old Jason Louderbucks and the buckboard and the son Jason believed in.

When he had finished with the past, his voice was shaking. "Maybe that bein' afraid will always be in me, down deep," he said. "It's the kind of thing you can't pull up by the roots. But I licked it last night on the butte. Now it's something I can handle. Do you see the difference?"

She nodded swiftly. "I'm going to make the rest of this country see it too, Billy! Tom Louderbucks isn't worth sacrificing yourself for. It was you up there on that butte. Matt Starr died in Spider Canyon and his gunmen are scattered. The Wineglass and a lot of little outfits won't be smashed. You saved them, not Louderbucks. Folks are going to know that you're not a coward, Billy. I'm going to tell them!"

Billy Loury shook his head soberly. "No," he told her. "If you'd been there when old Jason was dying, you'd understand. I made my promise to him, and I'll keep it. Nobody but you and me will ever know I was on that butte!"

Tears were in Arlene McLean's eyes. "Then you can never prove—"

Boots clattering outside halted her. A heavy voice cried, "Loury!" then the door was flung back and big Moore McLean came striding into the cabin. A bullet furrow on his cheek stained his full dark beard with blood. Other ranchers were crowding behind him. His huge frame was slanted against the weight of a saddle in his right hand.

"Yours, ain't it, Loury?" he growled.

Billy Loury said, "Yes," slowly.

There was a queer look in Moore McLean's eyes. "We found Brucker's body this morning. In the river. It had floated downstream and caught in the bridge. We went upstream an' found your saddle. There were shells an' cigarette stubs an' blood. That where you got shot, Loury?"

It was Arlene who answered. She was on her feet, eyes flashing. "Yes," she exclaimed. "I found him that same night,

and nursed him. Do you still think you can call the man I'm going to marry a coward, Dad?"

Moore McLean didn't answer that directly. "Me an' some of the boys figger we made a mistake," he said. "I got a look at your face, Loury, when you came between Matt Starr an' me. It wasn't the face of a man that has an easy time showing guts. I'm thinkin', Loury, that maybe there's a braver man in Two Rocks than the man who made a hero of himself dyin' up on that butte. An' Two Rocks will be plumb glad to have that braver man for sheriff—if he'll stay."

"He'll stay," said Billy Loury, and his hand tightened around the little fist of Arlene McLean.

THE END

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BRICK ENGLISH yawned even as his hole card was dealt him. But when he looked at it the yawn died, and he hoped it had gone unnoticed. The card was an ace.

He sat there, his gray eyes sleepy and sanded with sixteen hours of poker, and watched another ace delt him. He bet his stack and looked across at Brad Harmony, whose saloon this was.

"I got a chestnut gelding out there. "He's carrying a good saddle. Send a man out to look at him and tell me how much you'll give me," Brick drawled.

"I've seen him," Harmony said. "I'll give you three hundred dollars for him." His thick-lidded, dead eyes watched Brick questioningly. Brick nodded. Harmony signalled the house man to hand over the chips, which he did.

A king was Brick's next card and he checked and watched Riker, the sharp-faced manager of the Pacific Consolidated Mines, check too. The houseman checked. So did Iron Hat Simms. Harmony laughed and shoved in ten blues.

Brick took a deep breath and shoved in every chip. He yawned again when he got a nine. The others, all except Harmony, dropped out and he got a three.

That made three trays showing, but he checked.

The next card Brick got was an ace. He said to Harmony, "I won a hundred feet on the Ophir claim last night. What's it worth?"

"Eight thousand," Riker said quickly.

"Then that's my bet," Brick said quietly.

"Taken," Harmony said. "What've you got?"

Brick turned his hole card over. "Three aces."

"Four trays," Harmony said.

Brick stared at them for a moment, then nodded and rose slowly. Once erect, he threw back his shoulders and arms into a full stretch and over his pleasantly ugly face was no sign of strain or disgust or relief. Only a faint arrogance showed and he reached in his shirt pocket and drew out a small key and flipped it on the green felt table.

"There's the key to my safe deposit box in Simms bank, Harmony. The Ophir deed is in it, unsigned. Take it." And he

added wryly, "Take the box too. I'm pulling out."

"Have a drink on the house," Harmony said dryly.

"Sure," Brick said. "Good night, gents. Or rather good morning."

He strolled over to the bar, tossed off a shot of whiskey and shouldered out through the swing doors into the broad nine o'clock daylight of booming San Tolar. "Cleaned again," he reflected, mildly disgusted with himself. "It's time I cleared out, anyway!"

IN the five days and nights since he had ridden into San Tolar with forty dollars and a good horse, Brick English had won a fortune and lost it. He wasn't quite sure if Harmony's game was crooked or not. If it was, then it was the smoothest job of cold decking he had ever seen. But now it didn't worry him. The crowds, the brawling and the drinking and the gambling, both in money and mine footage, had suddenly palled on him. He wanted more than anything to ride down out of this town, with its hub-deep mud, its canvas and board buildings, its air of constant tension and hysteria, to the foothills and canyons and rolling range below. A forty-dollar a month job punching cattle looked better than a mine right now.

But how to get out? His horse was gone and he didn't have stage fare. The only thing left him was a pair of ivory handled Colt .45's which sagged from his flat hips now—those, and a pair of hard fists, an angular jaw, a shock of unruly red hair and a pleasant grin.

He scanned the street, jammed now with big six-wheeled ore wagons plodding from shaft mouth to stamp mill. Beyond the stream of them across the street, a stage was pulled up in front of the express office. It gave him an idea and he swung down on the sidewalk. About to dodge under the tie rail, he paused and looked at a chestnut gelding hitched there. He stroked the gelding's muzzle, said affectionately, "You're a good pony, Chesty, but you couldn't cut a paper doll out of a book. I'm gettin' me a cuttin' horse, boy, and leave you with the gamblers."

Across the street, he saw a spring wagon drawn up before the express office and three men were unloading light crates into the front boot of the stage. On the side of the wagon was printed, "Pacific Consolidated Mines." Riker's outfit, he remembered.

Inside, there was a girl behind the counter, and Brick walked up to her.

"I'd like to see the manager," he requested.

The girl looked up from her writing. Blue eyes regarded him remotely. "What do you want?" she asked briskly.

"The manager," Brick repeated.

"I'm the manager," the girl answered. Brick regarded her slim hands, the thick roll of taffy-colored hair that lay deep on her neck, and he grinned and shook his head.

"Sure. I own a mine out here, too. I just wanted to see how much you'd charge to move it down in the valley."

Before the girl could answer, a man's voice spoke from behind, "One side, Buddy."

Brick half turned to see a booted giant of a man regarding a piece of paper he held in his hand. The man walked up to the counter, elbowed Brick out of the way.

"See here, miss," he began, when Brick's heel smashed down on his toe. The man cried out, smothering his oath, when Brick swept him out of the way and against the wall.

"Stand in line, Big Wind," Brick drawled, softly. "It's my turn." His hand dropped casually to the butt of his gun.

The man glared at Brick with hot eyes, then smiled narrowly. "It's safe enough,

Hard-case. If we get in gun fights, we lose our job. Riker's orders. I spose you knew that."

Brick unbuckled his gunbelt and laid his guns on the counter. "I hadn't," Brick drawled, "but I've heard a lot of you tin-horn bully boys use that dodge."

Maybe it was something in the man's eyes that warned Brick, for as his huge fist was downswinging to his gun butt, Brick lashed out with a short, hard rolling hook to the man's midriff, the whole weight of his body following it and pinning the man to the wall. His left arm against the man's throat, wedging his head to the wall, Brick flipped out both his guns onto the floor, backed off, kicked them away, then said, "All right, Big Wind. Beat my ears down."

WITH a snarl, the man came in, head down, arms flailing. Brick's two stiff uppercuts did not stop him, and a lucky blow from the man slammed Brick against the wall. The man saw his chance, and he leaped, arms widespread to smother Brick's searing blows. Brick raised a knee, and the man crashed into it, his breath driven out of him. Quick as thought, Brick put his foot in the man's belly and pushed, and as he went down, Brick leaped on him. Then, straddling him, he slapped viciously at the man's face. It took four thudding, knuckle-studded drives to quiet him, and then he lay there, his cheek on the floor, limp as an empty sack.

Brick rose, wiped the blood from a cut on his face and took his gun-belt from the counter. He saw one of the white-handled .45's was missing and looked up quickly to the girl. It was in her hand, and it was pointing to the door. Brick's gaze swiveled to the front, and then he saw two men at the door, having been kept from aiding the beaten man by the gun the girl trained on them.

"Thanks," he said briefly to the girl, and reached for his gun. To the men in the door, he said, "Some other time, gents."

Turning to the girl, he asked slowly, "Why did you do that?"

She shrugged and smiled a little crookedly. "A man's life is pretty cheap in this town. Too cheap, I've always thought."

"But you didn't know me—and you did know that jasper," Brick pointed out.

"Maybe that's why," the girl said slowly. "I've never liked Hagen or any of Riker's bullies. Between his and Harmony's men, we dance to the same old tune here."

"Which is?"

She shrugged. "Keep in line, or clear out."

Brick regarded her strangely, remembering Harmony's good-natured bluster and Riker's diffident coldness. He said, "Maybe you're spooky."

"Am I?" the girl answered challengingly. "Just watch."

She walked over to the corner water bucket, ladled out a pitcher of water, and offered it to Brick, saying, "Douse him with it. Then stand back and watch."

Brick sloshed the water on the man, then stepped aside. Hagen roused, cursing and rubbed his jaw. When he saw Brick, he glared murderously at him.

Brick said, "I'm finished. Go ahead."

Hagen hoisted himself to his feet. Looking around, he found the bill of lading he had dropped and he slammed it on the desk surlily.

"There's the ticket. Forty thousand in bullion from Pacific Mines."

"All right. It'll go out in an hour," the girl told him.

"But will it get to Globe?" Hagen sneered.

"It almost always does," the girl answered quietly.

Hagen laughed. "Except last week. Three thousand dollars in gold stole. Last month, four thousand."

"That's a chance Riker has to take," the girl told him levelly. "We don't insure our freight. We can't. We give it protection and post reward money for robbers. That's all even Wells Fargo does."

Hagen smacked his palm down on the counter top. "Another thing, Miss Sutro, and you can tell your dad this comes from Riker: If anything happens to this shipment, Riker'll see that this Globe-San Tolar line changes hands for good and all."

The girl's eyes flashed. "That's bluff, Hagen, and you can tell Riker so. My dad owns this line, and even if it's not big, it's paid for and it gives service. Riker can take his business away, but we'll make out. And another thing. If Riker is afraid for this shipment, let him send some men along to guard it. We'll give them seats for nothing."

"Nope!" Hagen said flatly. "You run the line. That's your lookout. You want a look at that bullion before it's loaded?"

"Most certainly," the girl said.

Brick, smiling a little, went to the door and watched her glance into the two small crates whose top boards had been pried open for her. She watched them put the gold in the leather-bound iron trunk bolted to the floor of the boot, watched them shut and lock it, and then she came inside.

"See," she told Brick, smiling a little.

Brick followed her to the counter. "That's a lot of money," he said slowly.

"Well?"

"How many shotgun messengers?"

"Two."

"You need another," Brick said, grinning. "A bunch of saloon bums could fort up down the road here, shoot one of the horses and smoke three men out in a hurry."

He saw the caution mount in the girl's face, saw her expression become suddenly wary.

"I don't know you," she said quietly. "Maybe you've been sent in here by those same saloon bums."

"I was sent in here by Riker and Harmony," Brick told her.

"Our friends," she remarked drily.

"Not what you think. They didn't know they were sending me in. They cleaned me out of eighty-three hundred dollars at poker last night. I want a job and I want to get out of town. I can't guard my own money, Miss Sutro, but I do a handsome job of guardin' other peoples'."

She laughed a little now. "I believe you," she said. "I think I'll hire you."

Brick regarded her thoughtfully. "You're not doin' this just because you think I need a lift, are you, miss? I don't take charity."

"And I don't give it, when it comes to business. You be ready to leave in a few minutes."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Brand

THE down stage, as usual, was empty. Like the roads to all boom towns, the human traffic moved in only one direction. Brick met the driver, a burly, taciturn and bearded man by the name of Loosh Wilkie. The two shotgun messengers were middle-aged men, solid-looking, dependable.

Just as Brick finished roping on the freight in the rear boot, he heard the girl's voice and turned.

"Dad, this is a new man I hired," she said to a man standing beside her, at the same time indicating Brick. Her father was a grizzled man, whited-haired, with keen blue eyes, and a fighter's jaw. Under one arm was a crutch, and Brick immediately saw that one leg was twisted, the knee turning in.

Sutro looked at him keenly. "You the one that lost all that money to Riker and Harmony?"

Brick nodded. "Yes sir," he said.

"Then you wouldn't exactly pine away if this gold was to be lifted, would you?"

"Not a bit," Brick replied quickly, grinning, "except that I'm bein' paid to guard it. Who it belongs to don't matter much, mister."

"I hope not," Sutro said drily. "If it did, I'd steal it myself."

Turning to the girl, he said, "All right, Amy. I hope you're right."

He swung around on his crutch and went inside. Amy said to Brick, "You must forgive him. He's pretty blunt."

"He don't like Harmony or Riker any better than you do, does he?"

"Not as much," Amy replied. "You see, it was one of Harmony's drunken stage drivers that crippled him. Turned a stage over one night near the Midnight Cliffs and dad was almost killed. When he got well, he organized his own stage company and fought Harmony and Riker and beat them. They hate him for it, and he hates them."

Brick remembered this later, when he was sitting beside the driver as the stage was rolling down the narrow mountain road from San Tolar. He wondered that a man hating Riker and Harmony as old Sutro must, would take any precautions to guard their shipment against robbery. And then he remembered Sutro's fighting face, and he understood that honesty would be as much a part of the old man as his love of a fight.

A sudden lurch of the stage threw Brick against Wilkie, the driver, who growled something under his breath. Brick looked down at the road, narrow and treacherous, a gorge on one side, lodgepole pines steep on the other. "You believe in rollin' 'em."

"Scared?" Wilkie growled.

"Scared to death," Brick said drily. And that was the extent of their conversation. The other two guards were inside and below. They hit the bottom of a steep grade now, crossed a ford and the stage started up the far grade. Brick looked at Wilkie curiously. He had driven hell-for-leather all the way until he approached the ford, then he had slammed on his brakes and slowed the stage almost to a stop when he should have taken a hard run for a start up the next hill.

He had his mouth open to speak, when the boom of a shotgun ripped the noon stillness.

Another roar followed, and Brick whipped his own shotgun up just as the sharp spat of a .45 cracked out from the high roadbank on the right and Brick felt something slam into his shoulder, driving him forward to trip on Wilkie's legs and pitch down on the wheel team. He felt himself hit the off horse's rump, felt the sharp blow of the doubletree on his shoulder, and then he rolled down between the horse's feet and crashed into the road. All daylight was blotted out in a showering pinwheel of stars.

WHEN he came to, he was still lying in the road. The stage was gone, vanished up the hill. In the ditch beside the road, he saw two bloody bodies. Staggering to his feet, he went over to them. They were the bodies of the two other guards, a hole blown in the chest of one, the face shot off the other.

Weakly, Brick sat down. After feeling his shoulder and experimenting, he found he could raise his arm. He rolled a smoke thoughtfully, trying to remember what had happened.

Wilkie had slowed up. He was about to ask him why. Then the shots came. Three of them, and two were fatal. The bullion, of course, was gone.

"A sweet frame-up," he murmured softly. "Wilkie knew it was coming—even had the stage slowed down so they could get good aim!"

It was the old story—a company be-

trayed by its employee. Not that it mattered much financially, Brick reflected, for the stage line wouldn't suffer. And then he remembered blustering Hagen's threat to Amy: "Riker'll see that this Globe-San Tolar line changes hands for good."

He was wondering what was behind this, thinking of Amy Sutro and her father, when he saw a band of horsemen coming down the grade at a dead gallop.

In another moment they had pulled up and dismounted. Loosh Wilkie headed them, and when he saw Brick, his eyes changed ever so little.

"So you pulled through, huh?" he growled. "Well, you was lucky."

The men, it seemed, were from the stage station below where Wilkie had stopped to recruit help.

"Yeah. I pulled through," Brick drawled slowly, watching Wilkie. "I notice you never got hurt."

"Just a few buckshot," Wilkie said, indicating a ragged sleeve of his buckskin jacket. "Them owlhooters never do touch the driver anyhow."

"How many were there?"

"Six or eight," Wilkie said. "They was masked. I never knowed a man or a horse. Must of been strangers headin' for the camp."

"Sure." Brick said. He wanted to say something, to goad Wilkie into an argument, to accuse him of being in the plot, but he saw how groundless his charges would appear. His word against a tried and trusted stage driver, the most honest class of men in a mining camp. It wouldn't work. He looked over the posse. They had brought three extra horses along to carry back the corpses. Now, under Wilkie's direction, they were to split, some to take the bodies back to the station, others to try and track the robbers.

Brick, hearing this, said, "Any objection to my ridin' with the posse, Wilkie?"

"Go ahead," Wilkie said. "Only I reckon the coroner will want you back in San Tolar tomorrow."

"I'll be there," Brick told him grimly.

They looked at each other a long moment. Wilkie's glance was the first to shift, and he turned away to give orders in a blustery voice. Brick watched him a full minute, then said softly, "I wonder if you thought real hard, Wilkie, you could remember who those jaspers were that cut down on us?"

Wilkie wheeled, glaring at him. "That's pretty hard talk, fella'."

"But you savvy it, don't you," Brick said. He knew he wasn't using his head. Wilkie had a dozen friends here, and if it came to a showdown, they'd make short work of it. But Brick's temper was up.

"You're tryin' to say I knew this was comin'?" Wilkie growled.

"That's about it."

Wilkie looked nervously at the other men. They were waiting for a signal from him to turn on Brick, who was standing now, thumbs hooked in his belt.

Wilkie suddenly laughed. "You're loco, mister. You tell that and you'll git into plenty trouble."

"I'll tell it," Brick said gently. "It's true."

WILKIE, surprisingly enough, shrugged, and turned away. Brick looked at the rest of the posse, and they seemed puzzled too. Brick said to them, "Wilkie slowed up for the grade here. He should have had the stage rollin' as fast as she'd go, but he slowed down. All of us were shot except him. How does that strike you jaspers?"

No one said anything for a moment, not even Wilkie. Then one of the older men said, "We ain't no judge of that, mister. That's the sheriff's work."

"That's right," Brick said. "Are you goin' to let that jasper take the stage into

Globe, buy a horse and jump the country?"

There was a muttering among the men.

"What do you want us to do?" the older man asked.

"Take Wilkie into San Tolar and turn him over to the sheriff. Let the sheriff ask questions."

"You can't do that!" Wilkie said feebly. "By God, I'm known there! They'll believe me!"

"Maybe they won't when they look at the widows and kids of these two men," Brick said.

Wilkie looked uneasily at the men.

"What about it, Loosh?" the posseman asked him.

"I'll go," Wilkie blustered. "I ain't afraid to answer questions—any questions."

"Then two of you take him," Brick said quickly. "I'll head the posse here."

It was arranged thus, and Wilkie went docilely. Brick watched his surrender with quiet amazement. Wilkie, he knew by experience, was the stripe of man who would fight at the drop of a hat. And yet he had surrendered himself to this bunch of men who were his friends, and whom he could have won over to his side by a blustering denunciation of Brick. The whole thing looked queer, planned and framed, but for the life of him, Brick couldn't understand why.

When Wilkie and his guards were gone, Brick ordered three men to take the bodies down to the station, the rest to follow him.

The tracks of the bandits weren't difficult to pick up. Their horses had been ground-haltered in the pines away from the road. There had been at least six of them and they had headed south at a leisurely pace through the timber. A mile from the road, they had split, three heading down the slope, the rest keeping in the same direction. Brick split his men, keeping two to work with him and sending the others on the other trail.

By midafternoon, the two men with Brick were disgusted. The robbers had headed for the rocky country, and the tracking was difficult and tedious. The possemen lagged behind and let Brick do the tracking, while they smoked innumerable cigarettes and cursed the heat and the robbers and the stage company.

It was the usual thing: these men weren't friends of the dead men. They didn't care if a mine lost a ton of gold. Pursuit was useless. The robbers had escaped or were out of the country by now. Finally, exasperated by their talk and indolence, Brick walked over to them.

"There's sign here, but it's dim. I tell you what I'll do. I'll follow it till it peters out, which won't be long. You jaspers turn back. It's one man's work anyway, and I got nothin' better to do."

Put this way, the men agreed to it. They left, thankful to get away, and Brick resumed his tracking. When darkness fell, he shot a cottontail, camped by a stream, built his fire, ate the rabbit, made a bed of brush and lay down. His shoulder was sore, but the bleeding had stopped.

BY DAWN, he was up and resumed his tracking, his patience unlimited. Whoever the robbers had been, they had counted on just this laziness in their pursuers. They trusted to the rocky country and the delay in pursuing them. Hardly any care at all had been taken to cover their tracks, and as the morning lengthened, Brick saw they were swinging in a wide circle up the mountain. He found one sign, and one only. It was some horse hair he spotted hanging from a branch of dead brush oak.

By late afternoon, he pulled up on a ridge and over it could see the busy milling of San Tolar below him. Just to the

right of his horse, Brick saw the three tracks of the robbers. They had swung out in a wide circle and returned to San Tolar. Right now, down in one of the saloons, or sleeping in one of the hundred slab shacks that dotted the valley, were the men he sought.

With a sigh, he urged his horse down the slope, and rode into town. On his way to the express office, he noticed a crowd of miners gathered before the hardware store. He pulled up and asked one of them what was going on.

"Coroner's inquest," the man told him. "They got Loosh Wilkie in there." The man cursed. "If you ask me, this thing's a damn funny game."

Brick dismounted and elbowed his way through the crowd.

A deputy guarding the door recognized him as the guard who had escaped the robbers' fusillade, and let him through. In the rear of the long room, seated on packing cases and nail kegs was the jury.

Brick was surprised to see Amy Sutro and her father seated on the counter to one side.

Sheriff Hugo Byers, a big, slow-moving, middle-aged man, was seated by Loosh Wilkie, who sat on a nail keg in the center of the group. When Byers saw Brick approach, he stood up and came forward.

"No one here say a word," Byers ordered curtly. Brick walked into the circle and nodded to the men.

"Sit down, son," Byers said.

When Brick was seated, Byers asked him for the story of the holdup. Brick told him, and as he talked he noticed that Amy Sutro was listening carefully to his every word. So was Byers, his keen blue eyes watching Brick's face. Old Sutro listened gravely, staring at the floor, but missing nothing.

When Brick had finished, Byers said, "Then it's your opinion that Wilkie, here, knew about the holdup. He slowed the stage there at the ford. Not only that, but he hurried all the way before that, as if he had a date to be at a certain place at a certain time."

"That's it," Brick said.

"You'll swear to that?"

"Yes."

Byers sighed and turned to Wilkie. "Well, that jibes with your story, Loosh." Now the sheriff turned to old Sutro. "Sorry, Frank, but it looks like we'll have to hold you. This redhead's testimony bears out Wilkie's word."

"What word?" Brick put in.

Byer's settled his heavy gaze on Brick. "Why, Wilkie's confessed, son. He says that Sutro arranged to have his men hold up that stage. He paid Wilkie three thousand dollars to stop the stage and turn over the Pacific Mines bullion to the robbers. He—"

"That's a lie!" Amy Sutro said hotly. "It's a dirty, cheap frame-up!"

Byers shrugged. "Mebbyso, miss. But every man in this town knows your dad hated Riker and Harmony, who own Pacific Mines. He was hard up for money. All the evidence points to your dad wantin' to get even with his two enemies by holdin' up his own stage and takin' their money."

Brick's gaze switched from Amy to Wilkie, whose sullen, surly face held the trace of a grin. He understood it all now, and Wilkie's easy surrender was understandable. Wilkie had wanted to be arrested, so he could confess and implicate Sutro in a deal, the evidence of which was obvious and air-tight—and a lie!

"Better come over to the judge, you two," Byers said. He looked at the jury. "I reckon your verdict is murder, ain't it, men?"

It was, and Brick looked on, tortured by the knowledge that his evidence had helped to implicate Sutro.

"Then we'll see what the judge and county attorney have to say about the other charges," Byers concluded.

CHAPTER THREE

While the Gallows Waits

BRICK watched the sheriff and his prisoners file across the street to the sheriff's office. Amy walked beside her father. He wanted to go out and speak to her, but something told him that the less he was seen with her, the better. A plan began to form in his mind, and he needed time to think it out.

His first move was to go to the Empire House, hire a room and go to it. There, he washed and dressed his wound and then went downstairs and across to the express office. There was a boy watching it, and he sent him on his way, then sat down behind the desk to wait.

Presently, Amy entered. She did not see him as she came in. Her first move was to close and bolt the door and then she started across the room, her face tired and sad and somehow frightened.

When she saw Brick, she started, and he rose. "I'm mighty sorry about that, miss, over there at the inquest. I didn't savvy till it was too late," he said.

She smiled crookedly. "How could you know? Anyway, you probably wanted to throw the guilt on Wilkie."

She sat down and folded her hands in her lap, and Brick looked at her thoughtfully.

"What next?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Sell the line out and use the money to defend dad, I guess. What else is there to do?"

"Lots," Brick said softly. "Are you licked, miss?"

"I guess I am," she replied, looking at him. "Wouldn't you be?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

Her eyes changed a little, sharpened. "You've thought of something?"

Brick began, "I don't reckon I have to tell you what's happened. Ricker and Harmony planned that holdup of their own money and bribed Wilkie to confess that your dad planned it. Wilkie will be tried along with your dad. The jury'll be bought to free him, and to convict your dad. Wilkie goes free; your dad either—well—" He hesitated.

"Hangs or goes to jail," Amy said bitterly.

"Yes. Is that about what happened?"

"It's what dad thinks. I do, too."

"All right," Brick said. "You say you'll have to sell the line." He paused and looked steadily at her. "Sell it to me."

She only stared back at him and said, "To you? But you have no money. You had to work your way out of town. The only reason I'd sell it would be to raise money."

Brick grinned. "If this works, you won't need money." And he told her his plan. When he was finished, she sat there staring at the wall, clenching and unclenching her small fists. Then she looked up at him, and he saw that her jaw was firm, and there was a reckless light in her eyes.

"I'll do it," she said swiftly. "Dad need not know. All the papers of ownership are made out to me anyway."

"Then I'll get a lawyer and notary and it's done."

He started for the door when she called to him. He came back and faced her.

"It's queer," she said, smiling a little. "I don't even know your name, and yet I trust you. What is it?"

"Brick English."

"Mine's Amy."

"I knew that."

"Why are you doing this, Brick?" she

asked slowly. "You don't know us. Why should you risk your neck for this?"

"Why are you trustin' me?" Brick countered.

AMY said, "I don't know. I—I guess it's because you seem straight and honest."

"And that's why I'm doin' it," Brick said. He smiled now. "Did you ever see a Mex fiesta, Amy?"

"No."

"Well, they generally have what they call a chicken pull. They dig a hole and bury a live chicken up to his neck. They leave that stickin' up. Then they choose sides, line up on horseback and take turns riding at that chicken, leanin' over in the saddle and tryin' to pick him up by the head. He dodges and fights and finally he gets tired and don't give a damn. Then they get him." He shrugged. "I always sorta' pitied that chicken. He never had a chance. I always wanted to help him. Maybe that's the way I look at this."

It took only a few minutes to get the lawyer and the notary, and to sign the business over to Brick. He left with the lawyer, walked as far as Harmony's Melodian saloon, and entered. Harmony was at the bar drinking, and he waved a friendly hand to Brick.

"Hullo, red-head. Have a drink?"

"Thanks. I will."

"Heard you got shot up," Harmony said in a friendly voice. His thick chest and squat solid body all contributed to his air of monied dominance. His voice was deep, spuriously hearty, but even when he laughed his shrewd dark eyes were sober and wary. The black suit he wore was expensive, suitable for a wealthy mine owner.

"Lucky thing I did," Brick said, grinning.

"How come?"

"Sorta' made that Sutro girl feel sorry for me," Brick told him.

Harmony laughed. "Fine girl, Amy Sutro. A lot different from her old man, thank the Lord!"

"You're right there," Brick said. "The old man's crazy as hell. Pity she didn't get more of it.

"I dunno," Harmony told him. "She takes care of herself."

Brick set his half-raised drink down on the counter and winked. "Now I dunno about that."

"Why?"

Brick said, "I just made her believe I was comin' into a heap of money from my old man up in Montana. I bought out her stage line—on credit."

Harmony looked dubious. "That don't sound like her."

Brick drew out the deed and showed it to Harmony. There it is."

Harmony glanced at it, and whistled softly. "You got the money, son?"

Again Brick grinned. "Nary a dime. But I'll make it. If I can't win it gamblin', then I'll fight her off in court till the line is payin'."

Harmony laughed and shook his head in admiration.

"If you can swing any business my way, Harmony, I'd appreciate it," Brick said. And he added flatly, "And I'm not a ranny to hold up my own stages, either."

Harmony guffawed and clapped him on the back. Brick got away as soon as he could. He had said to Harmony all that he wanted him to know. The rest must wait for night—except for one thing.

First, he asked a teamster just climbing off his freight wagon in front of the bank where the best place was to have a horse shod.

"Why, hell," the man said gruffly. "A blacksmith shop."

"And where's one?"

"They's five of 'em on the street here."

"I know that," Brick said, "but I don't

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Up The Trail

BENEATH the sickle Border moon, a shadowy cavalcade of horsemen cleared the Border brakes, spurred their mounts swiftly along the Sonora trail toward the dark peaks of the Sierra Madre. Only the muffled thud of hoofs upon the soft sand of the trail, the clink of bit chains, the glint of the moonlight on holstered guns gave evidence that these were other than ghostly riders of that troubled perilous country. Don Muerte—Señor Death—and his band of Border raiders were once more riding on their secret midnight errand!

Yet the man who had taken that grim name, the leader of the wild bunch of faithful *Mejicanos,* was, in daylight, the Irish-Mexican scion of one of the great *haciendados* of old Mexico—a youngster who had given his word to his dying father to carry on the work which had brought the last flaming chapter to his reckless life in helping the downtrodden against the deadly sway of the powerful land barons on both sides of the Line.

Don Moriarity half suspected that his dark secret was known to the stiff-necked *patrón* who had been the partner of his dead father; and known to the lovely, dark-eyed girl, Don's half-sister, and to the proud Castillian son of the house who, eaten by jealousy and envy at Don's wealth, wanted only to bring him to a nameless grave.

Would that grave follow a sudden midnight bushwhack attack; would it follow the traitorous trail of some double-crossing *mestizo* in his raider band—or would it come when Dan and his followers, one moonless night, rode across the Border loaded with a king's ransom of gold, to buy from a hard-pressed American girl the cattle which were needed for the Sonora rancho?

Don Moriarity didn't know. He only knew that at all costs he must keep his identity as Border bandit from the knowledge of the gamest ranch-girl he had ever seen. And to accomplish his purpose, he must, single-handed, consign to a boothill grave a score of her renegade cowboys who saw in Don's mysterious presence a threat to their own plans to gain control of the girl's ranch and her far-flung cattle herds.

Could the reckless Irish-Mexican cowboy risk the girl's life by staying on that ranch to protect the girl who hated him—or damn himself on both sides of the Brimstone Border by taking her, against her will, to the sanctuary of his own hideout? That is only a brief idea of the lead frontier novel scheduled for next month's issue of *Star Western,* and written by Harry F. Olmsted, author of "Till the Last Man Dies!" in the present issue.

There are also scheduled novelettes and short stories covering the boundless reaches of the rawhide frontier, from the Pecos country to the blizzard-bitten ranges of Montana and Idaho, by Walt Coburn, Stone Cody, Ed Earl Repp, Art Lawson, and others.

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(Continued from page 144)

want a heavy shoe. This is for a cow-pony."

"Take your hoss to Ansell's then, next to the feed barn."

Brick looked suspicious. "Why, all them Pacific Mines teams are shod there, fella. My horse wouldn't carry one of them heavy shoes."

"The hell they are!" the man said belligerently. "The Pacific Mines outfits ain't shod there."

"How do you know?"

"Because I freight for 'em," the teamster retorted. "Our teams is shod at Swensen's."

That was all Brick wanted to know.

HE walked up the street to Swensen's. The shop was big, and its interior was smoky and dark. Swensen, a huge, raw-boned Swede was putting points on some drills, while his helper aws shoeing a horse. Brick took a seat by the helper, a small, wiry Irishman with a hard-bitten, fretted face. He was shoeing a bay pony.

"Now there's a pair of feet," Brick began in a garrulous manner, looking at the bay's hooves. "That's the only color horse to ride."

"I wouldn't know," Irishman said.

"Why man, you shoe 'em. You ought to."

"Sure," the Irishman replied, not wanting an argument.

Brick continued, almost arguing with himself. "A bay has got the best feet of any horse. A sorrel and chestnut is next. I wouldn't have a white or a black. No bottom to 'em. As far a pinto, they're for kids."

"I dunno about that," the Irishman retorted.

"I do," Brick said flatly. "You shoe all colors. Ain't you noticed how a paint hoss runs over his shoe inside?"

The Irishman looked up from his work.

(Continued on page 148)

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(Continued from page 146)

"Shure, and you'll be tellin' me next it's because they're all born knock-kneed."

"I dunno about that," Brick said firmly. "Mebbe they are. But I know danged well they always wear out the inside of a shoe."

The Irishman straightened up now and caught sight of Brick's red hair. He snorted. "That's the damndest thing I ever heard a Irishman say. You're daft, man."

Brick said flatly. "You don't know your business, Paddy."

"The hell I don't!" the Irishman said. "I shoe as many pintos as bays, and their hoofs may be softer than a bay, but I doubt it. As for them wearin' out the inside of a shoe, they don't any oftener than a bay or black, and be damned to you!"

"You got any old shoes you took off a pinto?" Brick said.

The Irishman glared at him. "I shoed a pinto today, and a half dozen other horses—all colors. There's the shoes. Take a look." He gestured to a pile of worn shoes in the dirt. Brick looked them over and picked out a shoe that was worn sliver-thin on the inside. He held it up.

"That belongs to the pinto."

"The hell it did," the Irishman countered. "I took it off a bay."

"I don't believe it," Brick said, grinning. "You don't remember. That come off the pinto."

"Listen," the Irishman said belligerently. "That pinto's shoes was worn even. Matter of fact, he didn't need shoein'. If he'd been mine, I'd of let him go."

"Prove it," Brick said.

"Ask the man, you knothead!" the Irishman said. "I told him his horse didn't need shoein'."

"Who was he?" Brick asked.

"Ed Boatman," the Irishman told him, glaring balefully at him. "You don't

make a liar out of me, my boy. If you do, I'll run you out of here with a hammer—and I kin throw one."

"Take it easy," Brick said. In a few moments the Irishman was pacified, and Brick left. Again he had found out what he wanted. The thing he had found on one of the piñons up there in the rocks yesterday was a tangled strand of hair from a pinto horse. Since the robbers were certainly Harmony and Ricker's men, then they would go to the Pacific Mines' blacksmith to have their horse's shoes changed. Ed Boatman was the name of one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Freighting to Hell

IT was almost dark when he got back to the express office. Amy was waiting for him. He told her of his success, then sat down to the desk and wrote a note in a crude, unlettered hand. It was addressed simply to Harmony:

> "Watch out for the bulyon. boteman come to my cell window and asked me did I want him to brake me out. they are takin the bulyon and runnin out on you."
>
> loosh

Next, Brick went up to the sheriff's office. Byers wasn't in, but his deputy was sitting against the steel door that led onto the jail, a shotgun across his knees.

"Can I talk to a prisoner?" Brick asked.

"We're shut up for the day, fella'," the deputy replied. "Come around tomorrow."

"Can't nobody talk to one?" Brick persisted.

"Not even the governor, boy. Run along. That's Byers' orders."

Brick left, confident that no one, not even Harmony, could see Wilkie.

He went down to the stable, saw that the stableman was grooming the teams in

(Continued on page 150)

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(Continued from page 149)

readiness for the night stage, and went out. It was dark now, but the street was still thronged. Brick stood in the doorway of a store and watched the street. He was looking for a boy. He let two small ones pass, then stopped a third.

"Come here, Bud."

The boy approached. He was a Mexican kid with bright intelligent eyes.

Brick handed him a silver dollar. "Do you know Brad Harmony?"

"Si, señor."

Brick gave him the note. "Tell him a man threw this out of the jail window, will you?"

"Si."

"Don't wait for him to pay you. I'll give you another dollar now." He gave him a coin. "Give that note to Harmony, tell him it was thrown out of the *jusgado* window to you—and then run. *Sabe?*"

"Es verdad," the boy grinned and disappeared.

When he was gone, Brick faded into the crack between the store and jail and made his way back to the alley. Here, he pulled a rain barrel up against the rear wall of the jail under the window, then climbed it and looked in.

Sutro and Wilkie were in different cells. They were both lying on their cots. Brick pulled his gun, aimed it a foot over Wilkie's head, then fired.

Even as the crash echoed, he was down and running. He headed down the alley, cut in between two stores and stepped out onto the sidewalk and lounged against the building. He saw his messenger leaving the saloon. He nodded in satisfaction. So the note had been delivered! In less than a minute, Harmony, Riker with him, stepped out of the saloon door and hurried across to the sheriff's office. Brick grinned. That shot would convince Wilkie and the deputies on guard that Boatman had tried to kill Wilkie. Harmony and

Riker entered. Brick crossed the street and watched the office.

The night stage pulled out of the stable and headed for the express office. When Brick saw Riker and Harmony come out of the sheriff's office, he watched them closely. They conferred a moment, then Riker half-walked, half-ran to his horse at the tie rail and mounted and rode off north in the direction of the Pacific Mine just outside of town. Harmony hurried across the street to his saloon.

Brick entered ahead of him and slapped down a dollar on the bar—a dollar he had had to borrow from Amy—and ordered a drink.

When Harmony came in, Brick nodded to him. Harmony walked over to him and ordered a beer. Brick could see Harmony was worried.

"The night stage travelling as usual?" Harmony asked.

"Right on the dot. Soon's I cuff off this drink."

"You drivin'?" Harmony asked.

"I got to," Brick told him, grinning. "No money to hire a driver."

Harmony nodded, looking absently at his beer. Then he said, "Any chance of getting a piece of freight on for Globe tonight?"

"Sure. How heavy is it?"

Harmony looked around and said, "It's a box of castings I'm sendin' back. Wrong size."

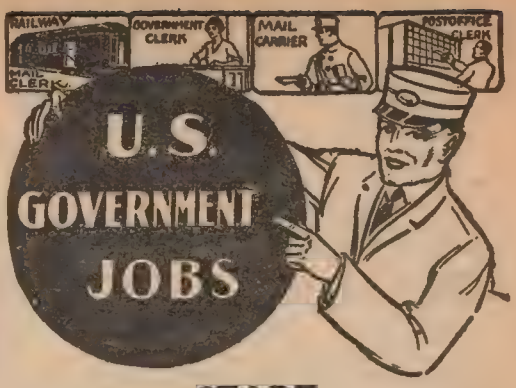
"Where are they?"

Harmony said, "Riker didn't know if he'd have time to catch the stage or not. He's up at the mine now. He'll load the stuff on a buckboard and take the cutoff and pick you up below town. If he isn't there, wait for him, will you? This is important."

Brick laughed. "Wait for him? I'll wait all night! I need the business."

Harmony bought him a drink and went

(Continued on page 152)



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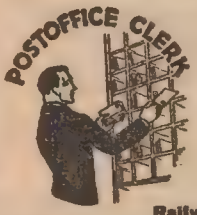

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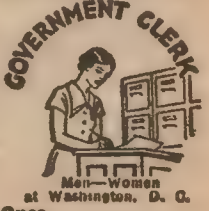

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29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.15
8.50-17	3.15	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.25	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
6.00-17	3.45	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.45	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.50	1.15
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33x4	2.95	.85	32x5	3.75	1.45
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36x6	9.95	3.95			

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(Continued from page 151)

on through the room. Brick finished, went out and crossed to the waiting stage. Amy was waiting for him in the shadow of the building.

"It worked," he murmured. "Everything ready?"

"Yes."

Brick swung up onto the seat, picked up the ribbons, kicked off the brake and rolled out of town. A mile or so below town, after the road turned and snaked west, was the cut-off from the Pacific Mine.

THERE was a team and buckboard waiting there and as Brick drew near, he saw by the lantern of his stage that the man was Riker. Brick pulled to a stop and dismounted.

"Give me a hand," Riker asked him. "These are heavy."

His cold manner had somehow vanished tonight, Brick saw. He was agitated, and he kept looking around as if he were expecting somebody. Brick strapped the heavy, boarded crate in the rear boot, while Riker watched. When he was finished, Riker gave him a yellow-back banknote.

"This is to hurry you up," Riker said. "I'm losing a thousand dollars a day because I haven't got castings for those pumps. Deliver this box to this address in Globe and tell the man you want the right size." He offered him the note. "This will explain everything."

Brick pocketed both the note and bill, waved good-bye and started the stage rolling. A half mile below, he pulled up and lighted a cigarette.

In five minutes, he heard a team approaching from behind. It was Amy, with Sheriff Byers, driving a buckboard.

When they pulled up beside him, Amy said swiftly, "Well?"

"Take a look, sheriff," Brick drawled.

Byers had an axe. They lifted the box down and Byers hacked it open. The top was packed with castings in excelsior. Brick pitched them out, his heart mounting in his throat. Suddenly, he straightened and said, "Ah!"

There, beneath the castings, packed in excelsior, were several bars of pure ingot gold.

"There it is," Amy said to Byers. "Brick's note scared him into shipping it. Does that convince you?"

Byers scratched his head. "Not all the way," he said. "This might be a secret shipment."

"There's one way to prove that," Brick put in. "Go root the Pacific Mines bookkeeper out of bed and have him show you the books. That'll show how much gold has been mined and how much has been shipped."

"Come along," Byers said.

They unharnessed the horses after driving the stage off the road and turned them loose. Byers put the gold on the buckboard and they started back to town. When they reached it, Byers took the alley behind the jail and pulled into its welcome darkness. He dismounted and said to Brick, "Wait here a minute," and disappeared. In less than a minute he was back with a short, meek-looking man who was introduced as Thompson.

"I don't understand this," Thompson complained.

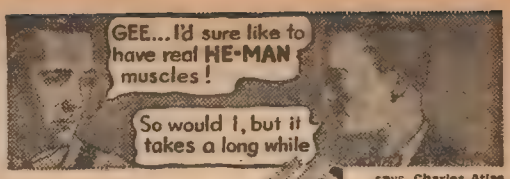
"You don't have to," Byers said patiently. "All you got to have is a key to the office and a key to the Pacific Mines books. You got 'em?"

"I told you I had," Thompson said. "But you have no right to make me use them."

"We'll talk about that afterwards," Byers said. "Get in."

Still keeping to the alley, they drove out of town and took to the mine. Its

(Continued on page 154)



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(Continued from page 153)

huge buildings were dark, but there was a single light in the building which housed the office. All dismounted and walked toward it. The night watchman greeted them and let them through. In the office, Thompson unlocked a huge cabinet, pulled down a ledger and laid it in front of them on a desk.

"Show me the place where it says how much gold has been mined," Byers said.

Thompson showed him the number of ounces.

"Now how much has been shipped?"

Thompson showed him.

"The same, huh?"

"All but about fifty ounces that was reduced today."

"Is it in bars, yet?" Brick put in.

"No. Dust. It was brought back from the stamp mill late this evening. It's in the safe."

Byers turned on his heel. "Come on, redhead."

THE ride back to town was a quick and silent one. They drove through town this time, and pulled up in front of the sheriff's office. Byers jerked a thumb at the box, and said to Amy, "Watch that damn stuff, miss."

Brick swung down beside him and they started across the street to the Melodian.

Amy called, "Brick!"

He looked back over his shoulder.

"Be careful!" she cried.

Brick felt a leap of exultation in his blood, and then it died. Byers went through the door of the Melodian first.

Riker and Harmony had their nightly seats at the green-felted poker table. Ten feet from it, Byers paused and said softly, "Clear out of the way, gents," to the men watching the game. Somehow, his voice carried easily, and it held a tone that meant business.

The bystanders melted away, and so did three of the players with Riker and Harmony. Those two sat utterly still, watching, puzzled.

"You shaved that a little too thin, boys," Byers drawled. "The gold is out on our buckboard."

"What gold?" Harmony said innocently.

"I shipped some tonight," Riker said coldly to him. "It was meant to be quiet. I thought this"—he indicated Brick with a sneer—"whelp here would keep it secret."

"Anything wrong with a mine owner shipping secretly?" Harmony asked.

"Yeah. If it's stolen gold," Byers said.

"Stolen? It was mined at the Pacific."

"And shipped on the stage yesterday, taken from it, leaving two dead men, brought back here again by your men and shipped secretly by you and Riker."

"That's a cheap lie," Harmony bluffed.

"You can't dodge it, boys," Byers said. "We've checked up with your output and your shipment. The gold you shipped tonight was the gold stolen off the stage. It was loaded by Riker, at your orders, Brad. It was—"

Something warned Brick to turn. He whirled, stepping to the side, just as a gun blasted deafeningly. His gun already streaking up, Brick saw Hagen behind him, and he whipped his gun across his chest and fired. That was the signal for all hell to break loose.

Riker must have had his gun in his lap. He leaped up, overturning the table, his first shot stabbing the floor in his haste. Byers, both guns palmed up by then, poured a chattering, flaming torrent of lead tablewards, as Brick saw Hagen pitch backward.

Riker was still shooting, and Harmony was just in the act of diving into the mass of bystanders. Brick flipped a shot from

(Concluded on page 156)

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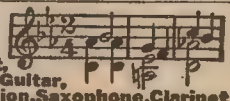

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(Continued from page 155)

the hip and he heard its *whup* as he saw Harmony stagger. Byers stumbled, went down on his knee, and watched Riker fold back in his chair.

Now Harmony faced Brick, the gun swinging out from his shoulder holster. Only an inch of it cleared his coat, for Brick quickly fanned his gun empty.

Slowly the mine owner's hand fell to his side. He looked down at the floor, took one step forward, and dived heavily on his face.

Brick's other gun was out now. He turned to face the crowd, saying to Byers, "You all right, Sheriff?"

And then he forgot, for Amy broke through the circle of men and rushed into his arms.

"Brick! Brick! Are you all right?"

And Brick, careless of whether or not more Harmony men might be in the room, folded her to him. . . .

MINUTES later, when Byers had his leg bandaged, they walked across the street to the jail, the sheriff hobbling ahead.

In the cell, Sutro received word of his freedom with a look of amazement on his face. He looked at Brick long and hard, and then his grim old face softened.

"Son, I wish I could repay you," he said.

Amy, her arm in Brick's, said cheerfully, "Oh, I've paid him, dad. He owns the stage line."

"*We* do," Brick corrected.

"Stupid! Of course," Amy said, looking up at him and smiling. "But do you expect the woman of the house to run a stage line while her husband and father do nothing?"

"So that's it?" Sutro grunted.

"That's it," Brick said, and his tone carried finality.

THE END

Acid In Your Blood Kills Health and Pep Kidneys Often to Blame

There is nothing that can so quickly undermine your health, strength, and energy as an excess of Acid in your blood. Everytime you move your hand, take a step, or use even the slightest amount of energy, cells are broken down in the body and create Acids. This process goes on even when you are asleep.

Fortunately, nature has provided an automatic method of getting rid of these excess Acids. To get rid of these Acids nature provides that your blood circulate 200 times an hour through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes, or filters, in your Kidneys. It is the function of the Kidneys to filter out these health-destroying Acids, and to purify the blood so that it can take energy and vitality to every part of your body. But if your Kidneys slow down and do not function properly, and remove approximately 3 pints of Acids, Poisons, and liquids from your blood every 24 hours, then there is a gradual accumulation of these Acids and Wastes, and slowly but surely your system becomes poisoned making you feel old before your time, run-down, and worn-out.

Causes Many Ills

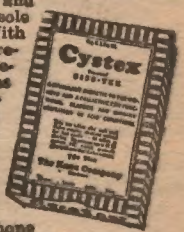
If poorly functioning Kidneys cause you to suffer from Acidity, Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Frequent Headaches, Rheumatic Pains, Swollen Joints, Circles Under Eyes, Backache, Loss of Vitality, or Burning, Itching and Smarting, don't waste time worrying and waiting. The natural thing to do is to help your Kidneys with the doctor's special, guaranteed Kidney diuretic prescription, called Cystex (pronounced Siss-Tex). Cystex works directly on the Kidneys and Bladder, and helps the Kidneys in their function of washing impurities and Acids from the system and in maintaining the purity of the blood. Don't try to overcome Acidity in your blood by taking medicines to offset the Acidity. The only way you can really get rid of the Acidity is by helping your Kidneys to function properly and thus remove the Acid from your system. The Acid is bound to stay there unless the Kidneys function properly.

Dr. T. J. Rastelli

Thousands of druggists and doctors in over 22 different countries throughout the world recommend Cystex for its purity and prompt action as a Kidney diuretic. For instance, Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous Doctor, Surgeon and Scientist, of London, says: "Cystex is one of the finest remedies I have ever known in my medical practice. Any doctor will recommend it for its definite benefit in the treatment of many functional Kidney and Bladder disorders. It is safe and harmless." Dr. C. Z. Rendelle, another widely known physician and Medical Examiner, of San Francisco, recently said: "Since the Kidneys purify the blood, the Poisons collect in these organs and must be promptly flushed from the system, otherwise they reenter the blood stream and create a toxic condition. I can truthfully recommend the use of Cystex."

Guaranteed To Work

Because of its world-wide and unusual success, Cystex is offered under a written guarantee to do the work to your complete satisfaction in 8 days or money back on return of empty package. Under this written guarantee you can put Cystex to the test and see exactly what it can do in your particular case. You must feel younger, stronger and better than you have in a long time—you must feel that Cystex has done the work thoroughly and completely, or you merely return the empty package and it costs you nothing. You are the sole judge of your own satisfaction. With Cystex there is no long waiting for results, because it is scientifically prepared to act directly on the Kidneys as a diuretic. For that reason most people report a remarkable improvement within the first 48 hours, and complete satisfaction within 8 days. Cystex costs only 3c a dose at druggists, and as the guarantee protects you completely, you should not take chances with cheap, inferior, or irritating drugs or delay. Telephone your druggist for guaranteed Cystex, (Pronounced Siss-tex) today.



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(Continued from page 105)

"That's my home country," he drawled. "Some of those folks—especially a certain sheriff—will be glad to see me."

Jerry Shaw looked at Dick Rains. She twisted a ring off her finger, held it out toward the tall deputy. "If you send him back," she warned, "you win five thousand dollars. But you lose your girl."

She swung on Tom Shaw. "He saved your job," she half-sobbed. "And he asked no favors when he did it."

"He's askin' none now," said Dick Rains. "But I wonder what would happen if by chance me an' Tom rode down to bunch them cattle. An' left our grub pack here." He looked at Red. "Of course this outlaw's too weak to travel with a busted wing."

Red grinned, as did Jerry, when the two rode off.

When they had disappeared into the timber, Jerry swung the grub sack on Red's saddle horn. Then she aided him to mount. He looked down and grinned before he headed toward that narrow pass through the mountains. He wore Mahone's black hat.

"Ma'am," he said, "I swear, I hate above all things to escape from a pretty gal."

She eyed Dick Rains' ring rather regretfully.

Brazos Red sighed, turned the gray up the long and weary trail, for he had heard her faintly murmur, "Good-bye. And good luck."

THE END

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